

Slouching toward dystopia

In this optimistic season, two thoughtful writers warn that we are stumbling toward dystopia. That's the opposite of utopia—a situation, says Webster, “in which conditions and the quality of life are dreadful.”

Begin with Charles Murray, whose October *Wall Street Journal* op-ed piece, “The Coming White Underclass,” is still crackling in Washington and around the country. Murray recalls that when New York Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote his 1965 warning about the disintegration of the black family, 26 percent of black births were to unwed mothers. Today, the figure among whites is 22 percent—only 4 percentage points lower. Meanwhile, the share of African-American births out of wedlock has soared to 68 percent, and we now have a criminal underclass that is terrorizing certain neighborhoods and producing horrors visible to all on local nightly newscasts. Murray now predicts that illegitimacy rates will increase as rapidly among low-income whites in the 1990s as they did among low-income blacks in the 1960s: “You will have an underclass that is about four or five times the size of the one we have now,” he said in a recent appearance on “This Week With David Brinkley.”

The result: a country with a Latin American level of violence and the possibility that Latin authoritarianism could follow. The United States today has 11 murders per 100,000 members of the population. Colombia, despite brave efforts by public officials, registers 70 per 100,000—about the same as Washington, D.C. In this dystopia, the affluent would most likely live as they do in Latin America—behind walls topped with shards of glass and with riflemen patrolling their lawns. And the great mass of people would live as many of our poorest citizens do today—in a society where violent males kill other men and abuse women.

How do we avoid this dystopia? Murray's answer: We must abolish welfare, all of it, for unmarried women. Encourage adoption, let extended families provide help, set up decent orphanages for children whose mothers cannot and whose fathers will not take care of them. But do not make payments that have the effect of supporting and sanctioning the existence of a criminal underclass.

★ **Multicultural dangers.** Journalist William McGowan found his dystopia in Sri Lanka, a once peaceful country with a parliamentary democracy and a British legal system. The unraveling of Sri Lankan society began with ethnic and religious quotas in schools and jobs, which led to riots, to “razor wire and guard dogs,” and to civil war in 1983. “Sri Lanka failed to build a stable multiethnic, multicultural society because it embraced many of the

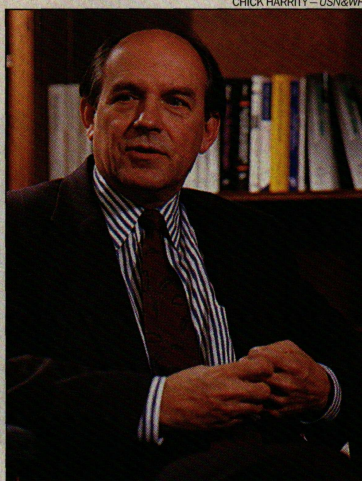
very concepts and ideas that multiculturalists in the West have advocated,” McGowan wrote in his 1992 book, *Only Man Is Vile*.

Today, in New York, there are some dangerous similarities: racial quotas and preferences that have produced racially charged politics, casting a cloud over the genuine achievements of the intended beneficiaries. Quota efforts to promote “diversity” have produced biased and incomplete news coverage, notably in the *New York Times* in this year's mayoral race. McGowan warns that “identity politics can be extraordinarily divisive, and can polarize a nation's politics, undermining economic productivity, weakening its educational institutions and straining the bonds that tie a people together.” The United States, even New York City, is a long way from Sri Lanka but may be on the same road. All the evil effects of “identity politics” are already apparent.

If Murray and McGowan are right, two public policies—welfare for unwed mothers and racial and ethnic quotas—are moving us toward dystopia. Yet both policies were adopted only incidentally. Welfare originally was intended for widows and divorcees, and Frances Perkins, Franklin Roosevelt's labor secretary, almost got unwed mothers excluded on moral grounds; at the time, no one imagined that illegitimacy would burgeon as it has. For their part, racial and ethnic quotas were adopted by courts and the Nixon administration as a way to speed the desegregation of American institutions.

Now, Republicans routinely campaign against quotas but have done nothing about them in office; Democrats claim to be against them, but have supported them utterly. There is a lesson in experience: The great universities have imposed quotas, which has sparked violence, censorship and discord among students, while the military has insisted on colorblindness—and is now the most integrated and racially fair segment of our society. The Clinton administration, which hasn't yet filled two key civil rights positions, could do a Nixon-on-China and abolish quotas; unfortunately, it has staffed its own administration using a quota system that has yielded many women and black graduates of elite law schools and precious few Vietnam veterans or white ethnics.

On welfare reform, the administration is still mulling. But all its present plans call for continued subsidy of unwed mothers, and none of its opponents or critics has the nerve to call for consideration of Murray's solution. The will is there among the voters to get off the road to Charles Murray's and William McGowan's dystopias. But the politicians seem willing to let us stumble on. ■



Murray. A call to abolish welfare

The will is there among voters to change course.