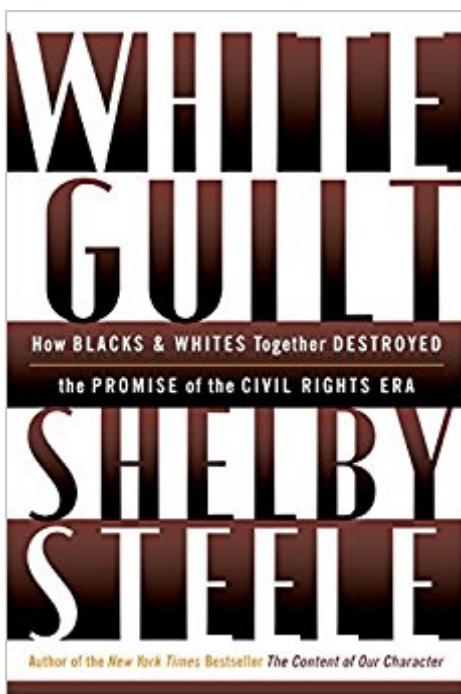


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# White Guilt: How Blacks And Whites Together Destroyed The Promise Of The Civil Rights Era



## Synopsis

In 1955 the murderers of Emmett Till, a black Mississippi youth, were acquitted of their crime, undoubtedly because they were white. Forty years later, O. J. Simpson, whom many thought would be charged with murder by virtue of the DNA evidence against him, went free after his attorney portrayed him as a victim of racism. Clearly, a sea change had taken place in American culture, but how had it happened? In this important new work, distinguished race relations scholar Shelby Steele argues that the age of white supremacy has given way to an age of white guilt -- and neither has been good for African Americans. As the civil rights victories of the 1960s dealt a blow to racial discrimination, American institutions started acknowledging their injustices, and white Americans -- who held the power in those institutions -- began to lose their moral authority. Since then, our governments and universities, eager to reclaim legitimacy and avoid charges of racism, have made a show of taking responsibility for the problems of black Americans. In doing so, Steele asserts, they have only further exploited blacks, viewing them always as victims, never as equals. This phenomenon, which he calls white guilt, is a way for whites to keep up appearances, to feel righteous, and to acquire an easy moral authority -- all without addressing the real underlying problems of African Americans. Steele argues that calls for diversity and programs of affirmative action serve only to stigmatize minorities, portraying them not as capable individuals but as people defined by their membership in a group for which exceptions must be made. Through his articulate analysis and engrossing recollections of the last half-century of American race relations, Steele calls for a new culture of personal responsibility, a commitment to principles that can fill the moral void created by white guilt. White leaders must stop using minorities as a means to establish their moral authority -- and black leaders must stop indulging them. As *White Guilt* eloquently concludes, the alternative is a dangerous ethical relativism that extends beyond race relations into all parts of American life.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 192 pages

Publisher: HarperCollins; First Edition edition (May 1, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0060578629

ISBN-13: 978-0060578626

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 115 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #268,940 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #25 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Race Relations > General #197 in Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Political Science > Civil Rights #702 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Civil Rights & Liberties

## Customer Reviews

Speaking the language of moralism, individual freedom and responsibility, contrarian cultural critic Steele builds on ideas he earlier articulated in his National Book Critics Circle Award-winner *The Content of Our Character* (1990). Today's problem, Steele forcefully argues, is not black oppression, but white guilt, a loose term that encompasses both an attempt by whites to regain the moral authority they lost after the Civil Rights Movement, and black contempt toward "Uncle Tom" complicity with white hegemony, resulting in a shirking of personal accountability. Steele makes a passionate case against the "Faustian bargain" he perceives on the left: "we'll throw you a bone like affirmative action if you'll just let us reduce you to your race so we can take moral authority for 'helping' you." But progressive readers will object to his assertion that systemic racism is a thing of the past—and to his praise of the Bush administration's philosophy on poverty, education and race. Though Steele takes a hard, critical look at affirmative action, self-serving white liberals and self-victimizing black leaders, he stops short of offering real-world solutions. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Steele asserts that the primary focus of the civil-rights era was a legitimate quest to remove racial barriers. In the shift to the black-power era, Steele sees a paradigm shift, away from racial uplift and agency, where blacks assume responsibility for themselves, to a "race is destiny" mode. As the counterculture merged with the civil-rights movement, America was exposed for its racial hypocrisy and, consequently, lost its moral authority. Here, "white guilt" became the moral framework for America. Steele argues that liberal whites embraced guilt for two reasons: to avoid being seen as racists and to embrace a vantage point where they could mete out benefits to disadvantaged blacks through programs such as affirmative action. Steele believes blacks made a deal with the devil by exchanging responsibility and control over their destiny for handouts. He sees a deficiency in black middle-class educational achievement, further raising questions about claims of lack of equal opportunity. Despite these omissions, the cultural analysis of America's loss of moral authority for its

Wow. This is one of the few books I've read that has completely changed the way I look at the world. Steele approaches the taboo subject of race relations as perhaps the best equipped scholar on the matter today, and his expertise shows in his vivid and compelling prose. I got the sense that what Steele writes in one paragraph would take most other authors an entire chapter (or even a book!) to tackle. You should read this book if you want to inform yourself about a largely swept-aside yet incredibly pressing problem that the United States is facing today. I've already recommended the book to dozens of people and I'll do the same here: if you only read one nonfiction book this year, make it "White Guilt". I promise you won't be sorry.

I'm going to try to actually review the book, rather than just giving my opinion on racial matters. I read this book because I've seen so much of "white guilt". Actually I would call it "white shame". Guilt is about something that was done, shame is about who you are. Shelby Steele is right that being white came to be associated with evil - imperialism and oppression of other races. This is so true that people are hardly ever described as "white" in a positive way. Either their whiteness is taken for granted, or "white" is pejorative, as in "novels by dead white men". So the bad actions of past white people were the source of the shame of present white people. I don't feel guilty about things my ancestors or other white people did, but I have experienced that sense of moral deficit, of not having the right to my own perspective, that Shelby Steele describes. And I've seen white people so often acting in a similar way around blacks - trying to appease them, not daring to criticize or disagree. I grew up in an abusive family where my own thoughts were worth nothing, and where I was the target of a lot of hostility. There were no black people around. Then I went off to college in the liberal Los Angeles area in the 70's, and I encountered black people. They generally did have an aggrieved, touchy, unfriendly attitude, quick to presume racism. And I encountered the liberal white culture, where being white was faulty and black people had the moral authority. One could easily be accused of racism. There were black riots in the Los Angeles area, and the newspaper had articles asking "why don't they burn down the white people's houses?" As if the crimes of white people were so great, it was just fine to burn their houses! Shelby Steele describes this mentality - the license for black people to act badly, the aggrieved mentality, seeing racism everywhere. He talks to black students who claim their university is racist, and asks them what specifically is racist. He says they either can't tell him or they bring up trivial events. In my experience, black people

newly from Africa act differently from American blacks - they act like we both are human beings, rather than being an instance of the race problem in the USA. They're more friendly and more dignified. One black guy living in South Africa said he was absolutely dedicated to studying hard and overcoming every obstacle in understanding math and physics. He didn't seem especially talented, but he was going to make up for that by sheer determination. I haven't heard that attitude from blacks in the USA, it doesn't seem to be very common here. And a black woman from Ghana who I know, owns a salon. She is very disciplined and smart and she works very hard. So where did this mentality among American blacks come from? Shelby Steele blames it on white guilt, affirmative action and special favors extended to black people. He thinks this attitude is an extension of the attitude towards blacks in slavery - that it insults black people. If he's right, then blacks would have had a different general attitude before the 60's, which is what he claims. The mentality he describes could also be a hangover from slavery. "White Guilt" is based on Shelby Steele's personal experience, which may not be typical. He grew up in the pre-civil rights era, when there was gross discrimination and victimization of black people. He feels there is no longer significant racism. But is this because he's biracial - white mother, black father? He's light-skinned and has partly-Caucasian features, so he's probably treated better than dark-skinned blacks with African features. Another black man, Carl Hart, came from an impoverished inner-city childhood to become a neuroscience researcher at Columbia. He wrote a book *High Price*. It's about the effects of the War on Drugs on black people, and about how he managed to escape becoming another *Criminal Black Man*. A lot of luck was involved. But if you try to impose Shelby Steele's portrait of a black culture of entitlement and grievance onto Carl Hart and his black friends as teenagers in the inner city, it makes little sense. He's talking about the relationship between black people and white people. Carl Hart hardly encountered white people as a kid, so there was no sense of entitlement or dependency. He says they didn't regard the whites they did encounter as human. Carl Hart does say there's a problem with black people not feeling truly part of the mainstream society. Steele talks a lot about how difficult it is for black people and white people to see each other as human beings. He especially talks about "white blindness". I like that. I have heard liberals saying that the "we're all people" attitude is deficient - that one also has to take into account what group the person belongs to (race, gender, etc.) This could be taken to imply, "do NOT really see black people as people, pay attention to the race issues". In practice, it often does imply this. Being conscious of racial injustice in general makes white people feel "white shame" around black people, distorts how they relate and does cause "white blindness". Steele talks about the "dissociation" and "narcissism" of white liberals. These are psychological concepts used inappropriately, just as "white guilt" really isn't guilt (at least

in my experience). He thinks that white liberals advocate affirmative action to distance themselves from the racism of white people in the past. So by "dissociation" he really means "distancing". He probably calls it "dissociation" because it sounds more scientific. Similarly "narcissism" has a specific psychological meaning - and has become a pejorative. So he attacks the "belief in the moral superiority of postsixties liberalism" as "a kind of collective narcissism". By that logic, anyone's moral convictions could be narcissism. He attacks the liberal columnist Maureen Dowd as narcissistic and racist, for a column she wrote about the very conservative black Supreme Court judge Clarence Thomas, for being against affirmative action, when she says he owes his law career and his Supreme Court seat to affirmative action. But it sounds like he identifies with Clarence Thomas as a conservative black. Steele has surely been smeared as a beneficiary of affirmative action himself. So even though he's at the prestigious Hoover Institution, he doesn't have quite the prestige of the white people there. Conservative blacks are a valuable catch for conservative places like the Hoover Institution, so there's the suspicion that he's there in order to protect conservatives from the charge of racism. After all, conservatives need to distance themselves from racism even more than liberals do. The discriminated-against groups who affirmative action is intended to benefit, are ambivalent about it, mostly because of the smear that their achievements are fake, their status unmerited. Especially an intelligent, ambitious black man would hate that smear, that likely he can never fully escape. So how much of Shelby Steele's dislike of affirmative action is because as an intelligent black man, that smear is especially galling to him? Is the same true for Thomas Sowell, another black conservative? Affirmative action, whatever the unfairness, has propelled a lot of black people who don't have special talents into the middle class - with jobs in government, defense contractors, etc. However, Thomas Sowell makes many good criticisms of welfare, affirmative action etc. He marshals his facts better than Shelby Steele. One of Sowell's arguments is that welfare, affirmative action and minimum wage laws don't help the worst-off black people get out of poverty. Shelby Steele also brings up black excellence in sports and music to argue that black people can do well without affirmative action. However, the blacks who make it in sports and music have special talents. They are also part of an elite. Shelby Steele's perspective may also have been distorted by the intense "political correctness" that he experienced in a college English department. He describes white academic leftists using white guilt to manipulate others. It's easy to imagine intense jockeying for power among academics, rationalized as caring for minorities. Shelby Steele does not offer a substitute for affirmative action. Affirmative action is supposed to act as a way to prevent discrimination against blacks. It's very difficult to prove discrimination, so by assigning an overall quota, the government seeks to force non-discrimination. So if affirmative action is rejected,

the next question is: what takes its place? In education, the idea of class-based affirmative action is appealing. People have a lot of disadvantages based on class. If you grew up poor, you probably went to a lower-quality school than someone who grew up with money. You might have had to work at a job while going to school; you might have been chronically stressed. It does make sense to lower the bar for students from bad backgrounds. Class-based affirmative action tends to favor disadvantaged minorities without being explicit about it. If you see a black doctor, do you want to wonder if he isn't as smart as the white doctors, if he got into medical school because he was black? It's less clear how to prevent discrimination in employment without race-based affirmative action, though. And there probably is a lot of discrimination against blacks in housing, in spite of laws against it. There's no affirmative action in housing, and the result is ugly. Shelby Steele doesn't give ideas to prevent discrimination. This is an "ideas" book not a "facts" book - sometimes insightful, sometimes very jaundiced. He claims that the purpose of affirmative action is solely to make liberal whites feel less guilty. He doesn't give liberal whites any credit for caring about disadvantaged people. Really? I wonder what he thinks about the Peace Corps or Vista, surely full of liberal whites. Thomas Sowell has a similar point of view, but he's less prejudiced and more rational.

What an incredible book. While written 11 years ago, it still is appropriate today. Most of the things plaguing our society today can be attributed to the subject of the book. My only complaint would be the title; seems like "Moral Guilt" would have been better, as the guilt described can be applied to things other than racial.

Intelligently written. No emotional fop or point of view hanging. The book is well written by a professor with life long experiences with the issues.

Absolutely the best analysis of how and why the troubled 60's still haunt us, and why things are no better, and arguably much worse, than they were then. All you have to do is to read the Publishers' Daily review and note the condescending, "But progressive readers will object to his assertion...", meaning if you are not a Neanderthal and have any brains, you will not agree with Dr. Steele's analysis, to see the problem that remains. Racism in this country, IMHO, was not the cause of slavery, it was the result of it. It was a form of cognitive dissonance - we "own" these people, so we must be better than they are. Various rationalizations were made for this "peculiar institution" historically, from legal to religious. Ultimately, however, the country realized that it was just plain wrong. This came about in the 60's, and the person most responsible for bringing it to national

attention was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He preached an end to discrimination, segregation, and so forth, and asked simply for Blacks to be treated equally, in a color-blind fashion. Unfortunately, Whites were overcome by enormous guilt by the realization that their previous attitudes were a house of cards. Young people, who were simply going through a natural process of rebellion against their parents, took up the cause. In this case, however, their parents, and society in general, felt so badly about their past behavior, that they aligned themselves with the kids. The kids, in response, generalized this response as giving legitimacy to whatever unreasonable demands might be, and extended the arena to include the Vietnam War the environment, and whatever else they could find fault with. Their parents, in the throes of what he calls White Guilt, found themselves unable to answer any of these demands, and therefore in the eyes of the young people, and more importantly in their own eyes, lost all moral legitimacy. They could not even condemn the "sexual revolution", which was simply adolescent lust given a new veneer because sexual mores were somehow associated with the past, and thus slavery. In fact, anything the kids did not like could be construed as being linked with slavery, simply because it co-existed with it, and thus seen as something that needed changing. A classic case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. What was society to do? The kids (whom we will now call liberals) answered with moral relativism - there is no right or wrong, it is all situational. They could no longer look to what had always been done or believed, because anything that preceded them was linked with slavery and thus illegitimate. For the first time in history, you had the children telling their parents what was right and wrong, the inmates running the asylum. Anyone who did not agree (as implied in the quote above) was himself a remnant of the past and thus stupid and bigoted. Society found the answer in what Dr. Steele calls dissociation. Not only white people, but older people of all races (including Martin Luther King Jr. and the original architects of the Civil Rights movement) were seen as bereft of moral authority and were replaced by a new generation of Black leaders like Dick Gregory who preached, instead of integration, segregation, or "dissociation", from White society. If you were White, then, the key to "proving" that you were not aligned with the sins of the past, purging your guilt by association (or color), and establishing your own moral legitimacy was to "prove" that you were not a part of the racist past. Universities, for example, felt they had lost their authority even to educate, and could only re-establish some leadership by demonstrating that they were distancing themselves from the past by instituting racial preferences in the form of "affirmative action programs." These programs produced numbers that made the (predominantly) White folks in charge feel good about themselves but did nothing to address the real problem of why they had to lower their standards to produce those numbers, and the process caused them to abdicate their primary role as educators in the

process. These programs, since they did nothing to improve the education of Black children, the real cause of the problem, left Blacks beholding to the largesse of the Whites in charge for their academic success, and tacitly admitting that they are incapable of achieving success as a White person would, by hard work. This situation certainly does not leave Blacks feeling good about themselves, and helps to explain why racial tensions have not diminished. Thus, affirmative action leaves Whites in charge, promotes racist thinking on their part (they are do dumb that we have to lower our standards to accommodate them) and leaves Blacks angry because they feel that the Black opportunist leadership has sold them out. The book is incredibly perceptive, but the theme is so simple and obvious that there is no question that Dr. Steele is right on in his assessment. Read the book, look at what is going on in the news, whether it be political, social, or scientific, and try to figure out how we are going to fix the result of forty years of this thinking.

The author presents his own opinion without providing any other supportive thought. Way too biased. Not what I was looking for. Way too much reflection on the past and seemingly little defining today.

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