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THOMAS SOWELL

Civil rights and rightists

In war, truth is the first casualty. It is an old adage that applies to political wars as well.

In the current political battle over new nominees to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, lifelong supporters of civil rights are being depicted as *opponents* of civil rights. Long before civil rights became popular, John H. Bunzel and Morris Abram were fighting for equality for blacks. Yet these nominees to the Civil Rights Commission are routinely dismissed as "white male conservatives" who are opposed to busing and affirmative-action quotas.

Polls have repeatedly shown that most blacks and most women are also opposed to busing and quotas. Yet no one says that most blacks and most women can be dismissed as reactionaries.

"Civil rights" first became a national political issue in President Truman's 1948 election campaign. Two years earlier, Bunzel had organized his fellow students at Princeton to fight for the admission of more blacks to the university. His efforts were supported by NAACP head Walter White and by other leaders in the civil rights struggle.

Bunzel is a Democrat who supported and spoke out for the late nedy, as well as Martin Luther King. In 1974, his years of effort in the cause of racial justice were recognized by San Francisco's board of supervisors, who voted him an award for "brotherhood" and for promoting "the elimination of racial and religious bigotry and discrimination."

Yet he is being depicted in some political and media circles as an enemy of the things he has supported since before some of his critics were born.

Abram likewise has fought for civil rights and the advancement of blacks for decades. More than 20 years ago, he championed the rights of blacks in his native Georgia and won a landmark case in the

U.S. Supreme Court. Being a Jewish attorney defending blacks in Georgia could definitely be hazardous to your health, in those days.

Throughout the decade of the 1970s, Morris Abram was chairman of the United Negro College Fund, which provides financial support for black colleges. Yet the nomination of a distinguished and thoughtful man like Abram to replace a shrill ideologue like Mary Berry on the Civil Rights Commission is being referred to as "politicizing" the commission.

Part of the reason these nominees are not being judged on their own merits is that the Reagan administration repeatedly has shot itself in the foot on racial issues. The stigma rubs off on people who had nothing to do with the administration's decisions and indecisions. Chickens are still coming home to roost from Bob Jones University.

There was once an old song, "It Ain't What You Do — It's the Way That You Do It." The president and his advisers probably never have heard of it. The Bob Jones University fiasco was a perfect example of what the song was trying to say. It was right to let the Internal Revenue Service know that its job is to collect taxes, not make public policy. But Reagan's worst enemy could not have picked a worse way to do it than by supporting the tax exemption of a racist institution like Bob Jones University.

The Civil Rights Commission needs some new commissioners. Otherwise, it will be paralyzed. Only its chairman can run it, but the other commissioners can veto and sabotage him so much that the agency cannot even be administered effectively, much less with any coherent policy.

Thinking and rethinking are long overdue on race and civil rights. Civil rights are the hallmark of a civilized society. But they are not a blanket endorsement of every hus-

tle. Racial polarization has torn apart other multiracial societies, and growing numbers and varieties of hate groups in the United States in recent years suggest that we are by no means immune. How to secure the rights of all without Balkanizing the country and having Americans at each other's throats is one of the major questions of our time.

A thoughtful Civil Rights Commission can contribute to a solution. At present, it is part of the problem. Its dogmatic commissioners and tendentious "studies" repeat the same tired clichés that have heightened frictions and contributed to the present malaise. Nothing new can be expected from them. Their statements are as predictable as the swallows returning to Capistrano — and not nearly as graceful.

People who say that the new nominees will not be independent and will not criticize the president have just not done their homework. Bunzel publicly criticized Ronald Reagan when Reagan was governor of California and Bunzel was head of a state university. If he could speak out against a man who was his boss and who controlled his budget, why would he be afraid to speak out against the same man, in order to hang onto a part-time, unsalaried appointment at the Civil Rights Commission?

The high quality of these nominees is a hopeful sign that the Reagan administration belatedly has begun to learn something in the racial area. It would be sad if the Senate decides to prove that it hasn't learned anything, by rejecting them for the sake of business-as-usual politics. The media also bears a heavy responsibility for its knee-jerk reactions and indulgence in uninformed stereotypes.

Thomas Sowell is a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.