Two decades later, the president’s national security adviser is General Powell. In a permanently racist society, do black men ever grow up in New York, graduate from City College, rise through the ranks of the military command structure and emerge as head of the NSC? It certainly couldn’t happen in today’s South Africa.

So is the bottle half empty or half full? Is America racist? Yes and no. We have made huge progress toward King’s dream, but we are still confronted by Howard Beach and the Jimmy “the Greek” Snyders of this world.

Perhaps the better question is this: What does it take to finish fulfilling the dream? Here the issues become more tangled, the assessment of blame more difficult, and a national consensus most elusive.

That last, in my opinion, is the key to our future. If we can develop a no-fault national consensus, we can finish the job. It is in our long-range interest.

A no-fault approach reduces the need to apportion past blame to each group for its part in the mess of the cities, the collapse of public education or the persistence of rural poverty. Let’s declare a national moratorium on finger pointing.

Our society will be stronger if we mutually commit to finishing the nation’s business. Our economic and political competitors, sharks in the waters of our future, will eat us alive if we continue to burden our society with the pathological legacy of slavery and racism.

Seen that way, King’s dream becomes less of a riddle. That is, if each of us assumes a share of the burden for solving the puzzle. We have accomplished mighty things, including winning a world war, thinking and working much that way.

Besides, that approach eliminates one more dumb argument from television over half empty or half full.

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Racism

September 29, 1991—Edward R. Murrow, the father of American broadcast journalism, ended his career disheartened at the direction of the new medium. He saw “so many lights in a box” flickering vacuously through our days and nights. That was a pity to him, the waste of what could have been “the biggest classroom in America.” It was becoming something much less than that by the time he died in 1965.

Sometimes when a promotion for some lurid tabloid television program comes flickering across our screen, I twitch for Murrow. His worst fears come true daily, his great hope rarely. He was not alone, of course, in prophesying this great video wasteland that now comes through on 305-channel tuners. The medium has become the biggest classroom, all right, but I don’t think Murrow would recognize much of what we see as valid education.

Every once in a while, a broadcast comes along that makes you wish Ed Murrow were still alive. I know that if he had seen ABC’s “PrimeTime Live” the other night, he would have been proud of helping invent this craft. It was television at its educative best and journalism in one fine hour.

The issue was race. One of the great frustrations about race in America concerns perception. A white person and a person of color can see the same event and come away with distinctly different versions of it.

This is especially true in matters concerning discrimination. Many white Americans, including distinguished commentators, will tell you that race is no longer an issue in America. They say remedial programs are no longer needed. After all, they argue, discrimination is now against the law. But Americans of color will respond that racism is not so easily expunged.

Indeed, there is significant evidence that racism in America is alive and well, living possibly on your street. In a way never before done, ABC’s “PrimeTime” demonstrated just how insidious and persistent racism is in America. It was as revealing a piece of journalism on this subject as I have ever seen.

ABC told the story of John and Glenn. They are two young
Americans of average size, looks and demeanor. They were comparably educated and from very similar backgrounds. Only John is white. Glenn is black. Thereby hangs the tale of race in America.

John goes to a store. A salesman rushes to wait on him. Glenn enters the same store a few minutes later. The salesman tails him around the store to make certain he does not steal. John goes to a car dealership. The salesman offers him a no-money-down deal. Glenn waits 10 minutes to be assisted. Then he is told he would have to pay $2,000 down. His offer is $500 higher than John's on a $9,000 car.

John goes to see an apartment. The landlord welcomes him and sends him with a key to look the place over. Minutes later, Glenn is told the apartment was rented hours before either he or John came calling.

Now, about television and Ed Murrow. As Diane Sawyer guided us through this exceptional portrait of America's No. 1 social problem, I kept thinking of Murrow. He believed good journalism required very little embellishment.

The power of the pictures is what makes it news. The power of the images of John's ready acceptance is vivid. The power of the images of the rejection of Glenn, time after time, is also vivid. No one could see those images and declare racism dead.

I asked "PrimeTime" producer Ira Rosen how this piece of journalism came to be. It began, he said, with a young black colleague who knew from personal experience about the power of rejection. That, I think, would make Murrow cheer ever louder. He would know that the telling of the story of America today demands many voices and many minds.

This broadcast is an example of many things done well by the people of ABC News. I have no doubt the country will benefit from seeing this portrait of itself. Thoughtful Americans will know its meaning. They will know what rejection looks like through eyes of color. They will know that it is not true that racism is dead. They might reflect on Glenn.

This is what he said at the conclusion of the broadcast:

"You walk down with a suit and tie and it doesn't matter. Someone will make determinations about you that affect the quality of your life, and the only basis is the one thing that will not change

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