

**A Review Essay: "The
Death of Liberalism in
Colorado Politics:
The Case of Dick Lamm"**

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On Wednesday, August 2, 2006, **The Denver Post** ran an op-ed by former Governor (1975-1987) Richard Lamm (D-Colo) entitled, "Minorities must look inward." (1) The column summarized a lengthier treatment of the same subject in Mr. Lamm's recent book, **Two Wands, One Nation: An Essay on Race and Community in America.** (2) Judging by both the column and the book, liberalism in Colorado politics has sounded its death knell.

The essence of Mr. Lamm's argument is that Latinos and Afro-Americans are falling behind in the competitive race that is America because their respective cultures do not sufficiently value "education, hard work and success" or "...delayed gratification...and ambition...." (3, 4) If that were not enough, Lamm clearly insinuates that the "failures" of these two largest of the domestic groups of color threatens American international competitiveness. (5)

Lamm's misguided analysis has a long, sad pedigree among America's white apologists for the racist status quo and American white supremacy. From U.S. Secretary of State, and proto-fascist, John C. Calhoun's assertion that the 1840 U.S. Census proved that freedom (as among Northern free black people) incapacitated African-Americans and disposed them to mental illness, to Edward C. Banfield's argument (in 1968) that overpriced black labor and an extremely present-oriented pathological black culture accounted for black failure to thrive in a competitive American social order, to Herrnstein and Murray's regurgitation (in 1994) of the old, nineteenth century, pseudo-scientific canard that inferior genetic inheritance dooms black children and adults to low-ranking pedestrian slots in a meritocratic, intelligence-based socio-economic polity-- all of these defenses of *l'ancien regime raciste* find echoes in Lamm's scribblings. (6)

Even more revealing is Lamm's invocation of stilted ethnic group comparisons between European ethnic groups (Italians, Jews) and African-Americans. (7) In a line of analysis that stretches back at least to Gunnar Myrdal (who labeled African-Americans "exaggerated Americans" without a genuine culture), Lamm laments that black school children still lag behind white students in test scores, and do half as much homework as Asian or white students. (8) These observations are coupled with an insistence that "minorities" should reject the path of fighting for "group rights," "reparations," and "new civil rights laws," and instead should embrace the path of self-reliance, hard work, education, and fulfilling the American Dream. Lamm boldly declares that if two magic wands were available to him --one to end racism/white supremacy, and the other to "infuse the inhabitants [of ghettos and barrios] with Japanese and Jewish values...", he would choose to wave the latter. (9)

In six chapters and two appendices, Lamm trots out all the standard conservative tropes: lamenting that American schools are in decline, producing internationally non-competitive students; propounding the centrality of inexhaustible moral values ("citizenship

participation," "volunteerism and philanthropy," "community pride") while remaining studiously silent as to the great material inequality which undermines these values; touting "diversity" but insisting upon "unity," the latter essentially a demand that people of color subordinate, and ultimately relinquish, their unique cultural traditions and beliefs; and professing the power of culture "to overcome discrimination, poverty, even racism if it sends the right signals..." simultaneously asserting that racism and discrimination have ebbed to historic lows in American society. **(10)** Lamm wraps these platitudes in a shrill plea for Americans to re-discover a commitment to citizenship in which self-sacrifice and the public interest are paramount, again recalling earlier, similar conservative critiques of the welfare state by Murray and Mead. **(11)**

Any critical dissection of Lamm's views must begin by asserting that his book and column amount to a monumental evasion of, and a retreat from, the necessary work of building anti-racist consciousness and behavior in America. And, while Prof. Lamm is busy celebrating an America in which "...[a] black or Hispanic baby born today is born into a world transformed--not a perfect world, but a world closer to a meritocracy than at any point in human history..." the facts of a glaring and growing racial inequality are clear for all but the most blinkered to see. **(12)** At the beginning of the twenty-first century, for example, black homeownership rates are just beginning to approach levels that Euro-Americans reached in 1900; between 1997 and 2003, Afro-Americans were less likely to receive medical care which met evidence-based standards; by 1999, the racial wealth gap between white and black families saw the latter with only 10% of the net worth of the former, and by 2001, white net worth was 6.2 times greater than black net worth; and, in the recession of 2002-2003, African-Americans lost 15% of their manufacturing jobs, greater proportionally than the losses of white workers in the same sector. **(13)** Even more telling is the retreat from racial integration in American public schools as re-segregation since the Brown decision (1954) is more and more apparent.

Surveying the current status of racial integration in America's public schools, Jonathan Kozol pronounces it "the shame of the nation." **(14)** Even when black parents try to secure the advantages of better schools, often in distant (predominantly white) neighborhoods, for their children, they face a dizzying array of economic, logistical, administrative, and legal obstacles. Kozol reports that good public schools, already attracting a large number of applicants, often require early admissions application, as much as a year in advance. Parents are frequently required to write a statement of educational philosophy, and their children may be required to submit to an interview and complete a battery of tests (usually including an I.Q. test). Some parents enroll their children in academic coaching classes to prepare for these entrance examinations. Over-subscribed public schools also may resort to an admissions lottery, further reducing the chances of acceptance for the out-of-district, aspiring black student applicant. The vagaries of the target district's admissions and referral policies typically are not explained to low-income parents, so that stratagems and exemptions regarding the rules of enrollment remain unutilized. And, finally, even if these particular black parents manage to navigate all of

these obstacles, there remains the fact that since 1974, the legal climate created by U.S. Supreme Court decisions (e.g., Milliken, 1974; Dowell, 1991; Freeman, 1992; Jenkins, 1995) has endorsed the re-segregation of American public schools, disguised behind the mantra of protecting "local control" and preserving "neighborhood schools." **(15)** Locally, Denver's public schools, c1973-2003, demonstrate this re-segregation and abandonment of racial integration. **(16)**

None of these real problems faced by Afro-American school children and their parents find their way into Lamm's sanctimonious homily directed at them. Instead of a consideration of the scandalous underfunding of poor urban schools (in which black and brown students tend to be concentrated), the predations of high-stakes testing in delegitimizing public education, and the unexamined re-segregation of American schools, we are treated to Lamm's litany of virtues and "hard work." **(17)** Nationally, schools with a majority of children of color (African-American and Latino) experience a funding gap larger than that of low-income schools, when both are compared to affluent public schools within the same districts, especially in states like Colorado. **(18)**

But like Bill Cosby (for whom he expresses glowing approval), Lamm cannot be bothered with unpleasant facts. As Michael Eric Dyson points out, much of Cosby's attack (and Lamm's) on the black poor is simply wrong: black parents and children do value education; poor black children generally are frugal shoppers, not consumer-crazed materialists; institutional racism/white supremacy still hampers black job seekers as a 2003 study revealed that prospective employers were much more likely to respond to resumes with white-sounding names ("Jay," "Brad," "Kristen," "Laurie") than black-sounding names ("Latonya," "Rasheed," "Ebony," "Kareem"); and, ultimate black assimilation (if it is ever to occur) into American society cannot be predicated upon Afro-Americans' denial of their historical and cultural heritage. **(19)** And, as Robin D.G. Kelley has asserted, a central brutal truth which must be confronted in addressing racial inequality is the long-standing and crucial role of the state in organizing, defending, and perpetuating it. **(20)** Oliver and Shapiro add to this truth by reporting that state policy profoundly shapes the three central mechanisms which they identify as explaining black disadvantage: the "racialization of state policy," the "economic detour" (whereby black capital is steered away from, and locked out of, more lucrative fields), and the "sedimentation of racial inequality." **(21)**

If we are to have an honest discussion about race in this country, something Lamm claims to want, we must be prepared to acknowledge certain truths. Following Benjamin DeMott, we should note four (4) basic truths about race in America:

1. black-white differences remain large;
2. these differences result from racism/white supremacy and segregation;
3. the white majority bears "heavy responsibility" for these persistent differences;

and

4. without large scale social programs, black inequality will only worsen. **(22)**

Moreover, Steinhorn and Diggs-Brown argue that any genuine advance toward racial equality and integration must be based upon five (5) key principles: "social engineering, constant vigilance, government authority, official attention to racial behavior," and a trade-off of some personal liberty in the interest of promoting "the greater good." **(23)**

In addition, a genuine debate about racial inequality in America-- again, something Lamm professes to want-- cannot begin unless America's true history of racism/white supremacy is studied, acknowledged, engaged, and surpassed. Entirely unsuited to this task is Lamm's hackneyed reading of American history in which "The glory of America is that...[the] founders" implanted "public virtues," which "our parents" used to forge "a diverse people...into one nation." **(24)** Such tripe amounts to a "heroified" version of American history in which obscurantism, xenophobic nationalism, denial of causation, rugged individualism, and avoidance of controversy combine with Eurocentrism to produce a lifeless, melodramatic parody, as James W. Loewen has so persuasively shown. **(25)**

Lamm's fairytale version of American history is also central to his old-style, tired program for assimilation, or Anglo-Conformity. People of color, especially, are expected to give up their own traditions and values in favor of "Americanization." **(26)** But, this old dodge constitutes the worst, and most pathetic, of Lamm's evasions, dangerous half-truths, miscues, and misrepresentations. In a stunning obliteration of the experience, historic and contemporary, of Afro-Americans and Latinos, Lamm seriously asks whether they can be compared to Jews, Italians, and the Irish. **(27)** But, these groups achieved **whiteness**, precisely the social identity reflexively and categorically denied to African-Americans and Latinos. Recent historical studies of American racial hierarchy have shed light on this phenomenon. **(28)**

In short, Lamm's pleading for the "second path" (of black and brown self-improvement) and the second "magic" wand (which would infuse "white values" into these communities) dovetails nicely with the regnant American approach to race, emphasizing the miniaturization of concern and retreat from state intervention, since the advent of Reaganism. **(29)** Consistent with this approach, Lamm ignores the behavior of the U.S. Government abroad (e.g., ignoring U.S. support for the South African apartheid regime, c1948-1994; fomenting civil wars and committing assassinations in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Chile (1973), to name only a few) and institutional racism at home (e.g., overlooking racially discriminatory mortgage industry practices, and the open sewer of America's racist criminal justice system). He ignores the predations and immorality of the capitalist class (e.g., the Enron debacle, reaching all the way to the White House) while preaching "civic virtue" to the black poor and working class. **(30)**

Professor Lamm seems absolutely dismayed at the reaction of black and brown people to white supremacy/racism; he bemoans their response to this continuing, festering

injury, but not the injury itself. He gives the game away when it is noted that exactly seventy-eight words are devoted to the subject of "justice" in his slim volume. **(31)** But, without a new definition of justice, a better, more egalitarian America will never be possible.

Justice is one of the principal terms in the American Social Contract which must be redefined as part of a transformative approach to a multiracial, multicultural society. "Community," "democracy," and "equality" will also have to be redefined. Lamm's additive approach to multiculturalism simply continues old errors. One such error concerns the role of white America in the required, imminent process of social change.

Lamm seems confused as to the role of Euro-Americans in the social construction of a new, multiculturally and multiracially transformed America. Let us be clear: historically, the white allies of Afro-Americans have defended our interests and promoted anti-racist consciousness and behavior. Our allies in the white community have not aligned themselves with our enemies in order to be "loving critics" (Lamm's phrase) who disguise their anti-black racism beneath paternalism and hypocritical moral sermonizing. In American history, it's the difference between Henry Clay (1777-1852), the Virginia-born Kentucky U.S. Senator and Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and Lewis Tappan (1788-1863), successful Massachusetts-born merchant and social activist. While Clay, the slaveowner (60 slaves!), temporized with slavery, professed "concern" about the fate of free black people, and was a founding member (in 1816) of the American Colonization Society (a group of wealthy white men who sought to resolve the slavery crisis by repatriating African-Americans to Africa, a project which the free black community, led by Frederick Douglass, vehemently opposed), Tappan became a leading abolitionist, co-founded the American Anti-Slavery Society (in 1833), established Oberlin College open to black and white students equally, and publicly protested segregated "black pews" in all-white churches. It was Tappan who led the support network which successfully defended the would-be slave, Amistad (1839-1841) African mutineers. Clay, meanwhile, engineered the Missouri Compromise (1820), and the Compromise of 1850, both of which extended the geographical reach of slavery, delaying the nation's inevitable reckoning with this entrenched evil. **(32)**

Dick Lamm more resembles a modern-day "Henry Clay" than a "Lewis Tappan," on matters of race. There is a long, valiant tradition of white anti-racism in this country, and Lamm has chosen to desert it. **(33)** Just so. Black people are well rid of false "friends" like Dick Lamm. Instead, at a time when racial inequality is growing not receding, as economic insecurity spreads despite a "robust" economy (e.g., during the 1990s, 77% of the families in poverty at the beginning of the decade remained there by the end, more than the 74% who did so in the 1970s), a progressive agenda is required of those who would fight for racial equality. **(34)** Such an agenda must include, among other things:

--a defense of affirmative action and its expansion;

- a serious effort to dismantle and destroy institutional racism;
- the enactment of reparations for slavery;
- the re-writing of American history textbooks guided by transformative, not additive, multiculturalism; and
- the creation, implementation, extension, and defense of universal and targeted social programs aimed at achieving social justice and diversity.

Professor Lamm shows his ignorance of Afro-American history when he singles out black neo-conservatives (e.g., Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele) as "brave souls" calling for black self-help. **(35)** In fact, the tradition of black self-help is as old as the Underground Railroad, the Negro Convention Movement, the black women's club movement, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and as recent as programmatic statements by the National Urban League. **(36)** Rather, as W.E.B. DuBois observed about Booker T. Washington's program over one hundred years ago, Lamm propagates a "dangerous half-truth." The way forward to full racial equality in this country is to embrace the whole truth.

NOTES

1. Richard D. Lamm, "Minorities must look inward," **The Denver Post**, August 2, 2006, p. 7B. Hereafter, cited as "Minorities...."
2. Richard D. Lamm, **Two Wands, One Nation: An Essay on Race and Community in America** (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2006). Hereafter, cited as **Two Wands....**
3. Lamm, "Minorities...."
4. Lamm, **Two Wands....**, p. 5.
5. Lamm, **Two Wands....**, pp. 1, 2, 4, 37.
6. Calhoun's racist interpretation of the 1840 Census is discussed in Alexander Thomas and Samuel Sillen, **Racism and Psychiatry** (Seacaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press, 1972), pp. 16-19. Banfield's book was **The Unheavenly City Revisited** (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1974). Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray wrote **The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life** (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1994).
7. Richard D. Lamm, **Two Wands....**, pp. 38-51. Lamm maligns Latino-Americans in the same way, asking rhetorically and breathlessly, whether or not they can be compared to Italians; **Two Wands....**, p. 45.
8. Lamm, **Two Wands....**, pp. 5, 39-40.
9. Lamm, **Two Wands....**, pp. 3; 40-41.
10. Lamm, **Two Wands....**, pp. 14, 15, 21, 26, 29, 30-31, 42, 53, 55, 61, 65, 70-71, 74.
11. Lamm, **Two Wands....**, pp. 16, 17, 19, 68. The two earlier conservative attacks on the welfare state referred to are: Charles Murray, **Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980** (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1984), and Lawrence Mead, **Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship** (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1986).
12. Lamm, **Two Wands....**, p. 42.
13. Samuel L. Myers, "African-American Economic Well-Being During the Boom and Bust," in Lee A. Daniels, ed., **The State of Black America, 2004: The Complexity of Black Progress** (Baltimore, MD?: The National Urban League, 2004), p. 59; Thomas M. Shapiro, "The Racial Wealth Gap," in Lee A. Daniels, ed., **The State of Black America, 2005: Prescriptions for Change** (Baltimore, MD?: The National Urban League, 2005), p. 44; Lane Freeman, "Black Homeownership: A Dream No Longer Deferred?," in Stephanie J. Jones, ed., **The State of Black America, 2006: The Opportunity Compact** (Baltimore, MD?: The National Urban League, 2006), p. 157; and, Meizhu Lui et al., **The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide** (New York, NY: The New Press, 2006), p. 116.
14. Jonathan Kozol, **The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America** (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2005).
15. Kozol, pp. 8, 135-160, 237-263.

16. See my "Community Development and the Politics of Deracialization: The Case of Denver, 1991-2003," **The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science** 594 (July 2004) 143-157.
17. Lamm, **Two Wands**...; the phrase "hard work" appears no fewer than four times (pp. 5, 33, 36, 54) in this slim 80pp volume. A persuasive critique of high-stakes testing in America's public schools is found in Alfie Kohn, **The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools** (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000).
18. Kevin Carey, "Top 25 Percent of Districts in Child Poverty Receive Less Funding than Bottom 25 Percent: The Funding Gap," **The Education Trust** (Fall 2003), cited in Kozol, pp. 245-46, 373n.
19. Michael Eric Dyson, **Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?** (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005), pp. 47, 80, 135-36, 216-18.
20. Robin D.G. Kelley, **Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America** (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997), pp. 92-96.
21. Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, **Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality** (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), pp. 4-5.
22. Benjamin DeMott, **The Trouble with Friendship: Why Americans Can't Think Straight about Race** (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995), p. 188.
23. Leonard Steinhorn and Barbara Diggs-Brown, **By the Color of Our Skin: The Illusion of Integration and the Reality of Race** (New York, NY: Dutton, 1999), pp. 222-23.
24. Lamm, **Two Wands**..., pp. 13, 18, 55.
25. James W. Loewen, **Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong** (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995).
26. Lamm, **Two Wands**..., p. 61.
27. Lamm, **Two Wands**..., pp. 5, 6, 45-51.
28. See, for example, David Roediger, **The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class** (New York, NY: Verso, 1991); Noel Ignatiev, **How the Irish Became White** (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995); and Karen Brodtkin, **How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America** (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
29. Lamm, **Two Wands**..., pp. 3, 40.
30. A recent discussion of U.S. imperialism, post-Cold War, is Stephen Shalom, **Imperial Alibis: Rationalizing U.S. Intervention After the Cold War** (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1993); a classic statement on U.S. misadventures abroad is Richard J. Barnet, **Intervention and Revolution: America's Confrontation with Insurgent Movements Around the World** (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1968). Discriminatory mortgage industry practices are uncovered in Thomas M. Shapiro, **The Hidden Cost of Being African-American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality** (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004); racism in the American criminal justice system is exposed in a voluminous literature, some

- examples of which are Coramae R. Mann, **Unequal Justice: A Question of Color** (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993); Michael Tonry, **Malign Neglect: Race, Crime and Punishment in America** (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Marc Mauer, **Race to Incarcerate** (New York, NY: The New Press, 1999).
31. Lamm, **Two Wands**..., p. 55. The word "justice" does not appear in Lamm's **Denver Post** article.
 32. Thomas Rush, "Henry Clay (1777-1852), An Introduction," **From Revolution to Reconstruction**, May 5, 2003, accessed January 5, 2007 <<http://www.let.rug.nl/~usa/B/hclay.htm>>; "Henry Clay," **Wikipedia**, January 3, 2007, accessed January 5, 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Clay>; Calvin Lane, "Lewis Tappan: New York Merchant, Abolitionist," **Exploring Amistad at Mystic Seaport**, 1997, accessed January 5, 2007 <<http://amistad.mysticseaport.org/discovery/people/bio.tappan.lewis.html>>.
 33. Herbert Aptheker, **Anti-Racism in U.S. History: The First Two Hundred Years** (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).
 34. Statistics on families in poverty by decade given in Jeff Faux, **The Global Class War: How America's Bipartisan Elite Lost Our Future--and What It Will Take to Win it Back** (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2006), p. 65.
 35. Lamm, **Two Wands**..., pp. 12-13, 72-73.
 36. See, for example, Ramona H. Edelin, "Toward An African-American Agenda: An Inward Look," in Janet Dewart, ed., **The State of Black America, 1990** (New York, NY: The National Urban League, 1990), pp. 173-83; and, "Prescriptions for Change," in Lee A. Daniels, ed., **The State of Black America, 2005: Prescriptions for Change** (Baltimore, MD?: The National Urban League, 2005), pp. 133-35.

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