

Prophet Out of Chamblissberg

Carol Swain sounds a wake-up call for people of all races. By FRYE GAILLARD, BA'68

The story begins in a tarpaper shack, four crowded rooms in rural Virginia, the segregated South of the 1960s, where Carol Swain and her brothers and sisters were caught up daily in an undertow

of dread. There were 14 people living in the house—12 children and their mother and stepfather, eking out a living anyway they knew how. They were the poorest of the poor in Chamblissberg, a little black community near the Roanoke Valley, where the weekends always seemed to be the worst. Those were the days when the verbal abuse from her alcoholic parents would send the household spinning into violence, and many years later there were memories of a stepfather swinging with his axe, and the children screaming and clutching at his legs, trying to keep him away from their mother.

Carol ran away from it all when she could. It was a journey that took her first to Roanoke, where she moved in for a while with her biological father, before marrying and starting a family at 16. She became, over time, a welfare mother and high-school dropout who eventually decided to turn things around. In her early 20s, she entered a community college in Virginia, and she discovered an affinity for the world of the mind that took her next to a four-year college, and then to a mas-

ter's and a Ph.D. After teaching for a year at Duke University, then earning a tenured professorship at Princeton, she came to Vanderbilt in 2000 as a professor of political science and law, and has since established herself as a woman of controversy and renown.

There is a sense in which she never strayed from her roots. With the recent publication of

a warning, "a wake-up call" for people of all races. Writing with equal parts scholarship and intuition, she argues that the nation in the 21st century is headed towards a time of "unprecedented" conflict.

Part of the problem, as Swain understands it, is the proliferation of new white nationalists who are different from those of a generation past. Gone are the burning crosses in the fields, replaced by a sophisticated racial campaign that relies in part on the power of the Internet. There are clever voices now, chilling in their counterfeit rationality, adopting the rhetoric of the civil rights movement to make the case that whites are the victims of a new double standard.

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her second book, *The New White Nationalism in America: Its Challenge to Integration*, Swain has taken a headlong dive into the intertwining issues of poverty and race. There are people, quite literally, who have called her a prophet, but there are others who say, with all the venom and hatred they can muster, that she is a traitor to the African-American people. Her intention, she says, has been to sound out

{Suggested Reading}

1. **Contemporary Voices of White Nationalism in America**, Carol M. Swain and Russell Nieli (Cambridge University Press, 2003)
2. **Inside Organized Racism: Women in Hate Groups**, Kathleen Blee (University of California Press, 2002)
3. **The White Separatist Movement in the U.S.: "White Power, White Pride!"** Betty Dobratz and Stephanie Shanks-Meile (Twayne, 1997)
4. **Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement**, Michael Barkun (University of Chapel Hill Press, 1994)
5. **Blood in the Face**, James Ridgeway (Thundermouth's Press, 1995)

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Carol Swain

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before the sprint down the homestretch to final exams and the winter holiday break.

By January, many freshmen—now wise of the ways of the University—contemplate changing their majors while seniors plan the next step. Faculty members and administrative leaders write letters of recommendations for those applying to graduate school and perhaps offer career advice to those they may have closely mentored.

Out of step with much of the rest of the world, spring on a college campus is a time to say goodbye. As the seniors study (or not) for what will truly be their final exams, crews begin pitching huge tents and arranging more than 23,000 chairs weeks in advance of Commencement. Soon some 2,800 graduates will realize the fruits of seeds they planted more than four years ago. By lunchtime on the first Friday of May, empty chairs and discarded programs will litter lawns across campus. By the following morning, the cycle that has come full circle 127 times to date will again have ended—and at precisely the same moment, a new one will have begun. ▼

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are placed, although Shanks says Vanderbilt excludes from its investment portfolio “companies where what’s being done isn’t completely transparent.”

“Our goal is to maintain or increase the inflation-adjusted value both of the corpus and the annual transfer to the operating budget,” says Spitz. “Fundamentally, it’s about providing for future generations the same purchasing power that current generations enjoy, to earn the minimum return to preserve the inflation-adjusted value.”

Moody’s Investors Service has observed that in the past three years, private philanthropy increasingly favors colleges and universities that already are well endowed. In effect, success begets success. In that sense, Vanderbilt is well positioned and will continue to benefit from its ranking among institutions that measure their endowments in the billions.

At the same time, in 2001, Vanderbilt ranked 51st among like institutions based on the value of its endowment per student, widely acknowledged as a more targeted measure of an endowment’s impact. Endowment-per-student is an

indication of how much of the full cost of a student’s education can be underwritten by the endowment. A larger number indicates a university could cover a higher percentage of a student’s cost. In Vanderbilt’s case, according to the 2001–02 annual report, that was \$211,851 for each of its 10,194 total students. By comparison, Duke was at \$278,023 for each of its 11,263 students, and Harvard was at \$971,225 per each of its 18,012 students.

“The best measure of an institution isn’t the total of its endowment, but rather endowment assets per student,” says Spitz. Vanderbilt’s relatively low endowment-per-student ratio is just one of many challenges that keepers of the University’s endowment face in the coming decade.

“Are we fat and happy? No. It’s one of the reasons we must be diligent. And we must continue to be good stewards of our money,” says Shanks. “The next 10 years will be different. The period we saw in the ’90s won’t repeat itself, so it will be hard to have the kinds of endowment gains we’ve enjoyed. Having said that, we’re fast followers of viable market trends.” ▼

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“The National Association for the Advancement of White People,” says Reno Wolfe, the president of the group, “was set up to get us back to the point where everyone is seen as created equal. ... We just want to return to the ideal in which racially based policies of affirmative action and special privileges and special programs of any kind which are given to anybody, no matter what their race, are viewed as contrary to the best interests of race relations here in America.”

Swain believes that for many white nationalists, something more sinister lies beneath the veneer of sweet reason. There are extremists who dream of a racial holy war, or a white-only nation where people of color are no longer welcome. But Swain is worried less about the lunatic fringe—the people who make no secret of their hate—than about the new-style leaders on the radical right who have found a set of issues to broaden their appeal.

The most volatile of those issues is affirmative action—those race-based preferences in hiring, government contracts and college

admissions that have been a part of public policy since the 1970s. White Americans overwhelmingly see the policy as wrong, a violation of the promise of Martin Luther King that the fundamental goal of the civil rights movement was a color-blind society where people were judged “not by the color of their skin, but the content of their character.” As Swain believes, social and economic forces are at work that add a level of urgency to the issue. Whites are a minority in many large cities, and according to current demographic projections, they will be a minority in the nation by the year 2050. Add to that a layer of economic uncertainty, and Swain is convinced that many white people are primed and ready for the message of extremists.

“The issues that the new white nationalists champion are also those that are on people’s minds,” she says. “They paint a picture that is very frightening, and my worry is that if whites get caught in identity politics—if they see themselves as a distinct racial group whose interests are ignored by their leaders and the government—they may be drawn to

the more extreme elements. They may feel like they have no other place to go.”

Swain’s solution is simple—and shocking to many white liberals and blacks who still see affirmative action as essential. She wants to abolish all race-based preferences, and more than that, she sees the need for a new way of thinking. She is impatient with African-Americans who are spending their energy on symbolic issues like the banning of the Confederate flag in public places. She also opposes the call for reparations, an idea that seems to be gaining momentum among an important segment of the black population. Swain says she understands the shameful history of slavery and the impulse to seek compensation. But those issues, she says, are bitterly divisive and ultimately irrelevant to the most urgent needs still facing black Americans.

In poor neighborhoods especially, there are life-and-death problems of crime and drugs and single-parent homes where children drift too often into trouble. But instead of searching for creative solutions, Swain main-

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tains that “African-American leaders, using a script from the 1960s, persist in a style of racial protest that is detrimental to the interests not only of blacks but the nation as a whole.”

Last fall at Delaware State University, she made her case to the black student body. The discussion quickly became emotional, as young people wrestled with their anger over slavery and segregation and prejudice. For some, Swain became a lightning rod for their rage.

“You are poison!” one male student shouted. “You hate your own people.”

Swain, at first glance, seems an unlikely target for that kind of venom. She speaks in a soft, steady voice—a handsome woman, now 48, with a round, pretty face and dark, gentle eyes. There was a time, she says, when the criticism bothered her. A decade ago, she wrote her first book, an award-winning study of Congress entitled *Black Faces, Black Interests*. In it she argued against creation of additional black districts in the House of Representatives—a policy that had the unintended effect of creating other districts that were nearly all white, where officials were indifferent to the needs of black people. She was deeply shaken at first when black leaders criticized her position.

“I was not ready for it,” she remembers. “It caused me to question whether I was hurting black people. I entertained the possibility of being wrong. I found it very painful.”

Now, however, she says she feels more secure, more certain of the message that the country needs to hear. In many respects, it’s a message that offends every shade of opinion. She believes, for example, that prejudice and poverty still need to be addressed, and she draws on the lessons of her own troubled past. She remembers her escape from her family of dysfunction, where her brothers and sisters all dropped out of school, and some of them drifted into drugs and petty crime. She was a teenager, working at one of her low-paying jobs, when a supervisor and one of her colleagues told her she was smart and ought to go to college. Swain believes in the need for that kind of outreach, and thus as a matter of public policy, she argues not for an end to affirmative action, but a revamping of it, making it a race-neutral policy based on need.

She thinks a majority of Americans might agree. As a part of her research, she sur-

veyed 850 people, scientifically chosen from multiple backgrounds, presenting them a hypothetical situation. An admissions officer from a state university must choose between two qualified applicants. One is an A student from a prosperous family who has impressive scores on standardized tests. The other is a B student from a low-income family who has held down a job while attending his classes. Should the university reach out to the less advantaged student—a young person who appears to show initiative and promise—or should it be guided by objective criteria, the bottom-line average of grades and test scores?

Swain discovered that a majority of Americans, regardless of their own race and the race of the students involved, wanted to reach out to the person less advantaged. They recognized the subtleties involved in admissions and didn’t want to reduce it to a matter of numbers. But the majority of those surveyed, black and white, did not support a preference based on race.

Swain sees hope for the future in that. She believes it is possible to build a consensus for attacking the problems of poverty and prejudice, and she has offered a set of proposals to that end. Among other things, she calls for an income subsidy for the working poor in order to guarantee a living wage, a larger investment in community colleges so that everybody who wants to attend one can do so, stepped-up enforcement of discrimination laws, and even a public-private partnership to assure that the working poor have access to cars and, thus, to the ability to hold down a job.

Partly because of what her scholarship tells her, and partly as an article of faith, she believes the nation could adopt that agenda. There is a strain of compassion in the American character that could be the cornerstone of consensus. But Swain can imagine the opposite possibility, and in fact her greatest fear for the country is a terrifying era of racial hostility, exploited by sophisticated white nationalists and fed by the knee-jerk militancy of black leaders. The antidote, she believes, is a national dialogue, unshackled by the norms of political correctness.

It is no longer acceptable, as Swain understands it, for the media to fly into a national frenzy when whites drag a black man to death behind a car, but to give it only sporadic atten-

tion when a black man shoots five whites in Pennsylvania and police officers discover “hate writings” in his home. At the same time, it is equally abhorrent when police in New York shoot an unarmed black man 41 times, while white suspects, even those going armed, “are treated like family members gone astray.”

Her fundamental message is that it’s time for all double standards to stop. We are all the children of God, she says, and are therefore the brothers and sisters of one another, and that is the understanding that can save us. With the publication of her book in the fall, she has presented her case with relentless rationality, and from the *New York Times* to the *Washington Times*, the national media has begun to take notice. She has found herself vilified on occasion, but she has also won her share of admiration, even from some of the people who disagree.

John Egerton, for example, is a white southern author living in Nashville. He has written extensively about the civil rights movement, and has established himself over a long career as a voice of decency and racial moderation. He still believes in affirmative action, a deliberate reaching out to people of color. Otherwise, he says, prestigious universities such as the one in his city will rapidly become even whiter than they are. But he also welcomes the views of Carol Swain, particularly her call for a national dialogue of civility and candor.

“Dr. Swain herself embodies that call,” Egerton says. “Even if you disagree with what she says, hers is an urgent warning to the country. She is not a person to be ignored.” ▼

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sional high-speed, tailgating, one-fingered wave. (His wife always said, “What if that car had stopped? What would you have done then? You’re putting us in danger.” Ed always apologized—You’re right, you’re right, I’m sorry—but deep down allowed himself to think, *I da kicked his ass.*) Another part of Ed, a smarter, more mature part, but one that he didn’t like nearly as well, suggested that he call the police. (“Hello, police? There’s a man on my porch and I’m too afraid to take care of it myself. Could you send someone over? Policewomen would be fine.”) *No, sir*, thought Ed. *We can’t*

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