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Kellogg's Bet on 'Racial Healing'

By Stephan Thernstrom

Before you next pour yourself a bowl of Kellogg's Cornflakes or Special K, you may want to pause to consider what a foundation founded on W.K. Kellogg's fortune is doing with its money. Last week the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, whose assets include Kellogg stock but which operates independently of the company, proudly announced that it has committed \$75 million to launch the "America Healing Initiative."

The foundation calls this "the most significant effort in our nation's history to bring racial healing to communities and dismantle structural racism in America." In fact, it's the largest single boondoggle ever created for the racial-grievance industry.

Kellogg has long concentrated its efforts on children's health issues, and on the needs of particularly "vulnerable " youth. It has sought to ensure that "all" of them will have "equal access to opportunity." Sounds fine. Yet the new program is almost exclusively focused on only some "vulnerable" children, i.e. those from "minority populations."

The foundation sees minorities as constantly victimized by pervasive racism. "Cultural, policy, and institutional forms of racism" are ubiquitous in our society, doing immense damage to innocent youths, its "Fact Sheet" asserts.

Appalling—if true. But what evidence convinced Kellogg that racism is such a clear-and-present danger to the children of America today? Foundation officials point to racial and ethnic disparities: Hispanics and blacks, for example, have much higher poverty rates than whites, and are far less likely to have completed college.

Well, yes. We did know that. But is it self-evident that these economic and educational differences are simply or even largely "the consequences of racism?" Might these disparities perhaps have something to do with the fact that many millions of Latino immigrants with an average of only eight years of schooling have flooded into the U.S.? It is not exactly surprising that they typically earn much less than native-born Americans, and that very few of them can afford to devote several years to getting a high school and then a college education.

As for African Americans, black students in their final year of high school have reading and math skills no better than those of whites and Asians who are still in the eighth grade. Their prospects of going on to graduate from college and to earn a decent income are inevitably not good. One obvious cause of the sharp disparities is the overwhelming

preponderance of black single-parent families, a pattern that would not magically disappear if every scintilla of remaining racism vanished overnight.

Even if one accepts the dubious premise that "cultural," "policy," "institutional," "structural" or some other protean form of racism is driving the problem, how will the foundation go about "dismantling" it? Kellogg envisions a therapeutic program transforming us into "a nation where each community has reconciled its own history of racism." Dr. Gail Christopher, the foundation's vice president for programs, says the America Healing Initiative will "shine a light on racism so that we can put its effects on children and communities behind us."

To "shine a light on racism," real or imagined, is the easy part; putting its effects behind us is another matter. For communities to "reconcile" their "own history of racism," we are told, "acknowledging past wrongs and group suffering" is essential. The foundation is a bit more specific about how its money will be distributed. It will go to "community-based regional and national organizations" that "work to address racism and bring about healing in communities." The first round of awards, announced on May 11, went to more than 100 such groups from 29 states and the District of Columbia.

It is difficult to tell exactly what many of the grantees will be doing. Alongside language about building "inter- and intra-ethnic trust" their purpose statements tend to echo the grantor's vague language about healing and the like. Not many appear to have been as explicit in their aims as the applicant that proposed working "to achieve policy change in the grocery industry in low-income neighborhoods in Los Angeles."

It is conceivable that some of these organizations will be able to do something to improve the lives of young people. But the nation's seventh-largest philanthropic foundation might have spent its \$75 million to attack the real problems that impede the development of many minority children (and many white ones as well). Improving our schools, the traditional avenue of social mobility for young Americans, deserves the highest priority.

The recently released results of the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress reading tests reveal that 52% of black 4th-graders and 51% of Hispanics lack even the most basic reading skills; in the 8th grade the figures are 43% and 39% respectively. Blacks and Latinos without a strong education are second-class citizens in a land of opportunity.

Some schools do far better than this, however. Kellogg could have offered to pick up the tab for the Washington D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program that the Obama administration has killed off, or contributed to excellent charter schools like MATCH in Boston. It could have supported the further expansion of charter school networks that have proven results—KIPP and Uncommon Schools, among them.

If Kellogg wants to do something constructive for disadvantaged children, it should back such innovative efforts to improve their cognitive skills. The foundation cannot see that point, alas, because it has bought into the simplistic notion that all disparities in

educational achievement are attributable to continuing racism—and thus is financing antiracist programs devoted to publicizing "past wrongs and group suffering." Nothing good is likely to come from this.

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