

# More Harm Than Good

*Great Society policies have largely failed African Americans*

**Please Stop Helping Us: How Liberals Make It Harder for Blacks to Succeed**

By Jason L. Riley

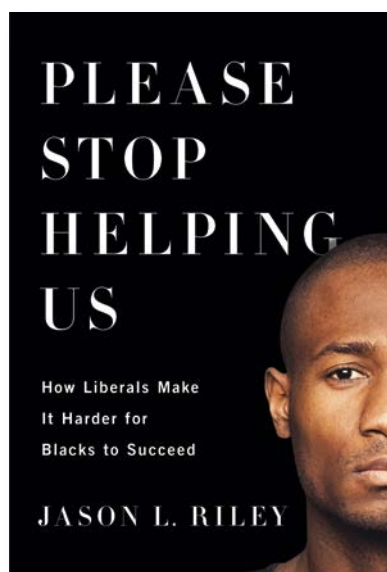
*Encounter Books, 2014, \$23.99; 184 pages.*

*As reviewed by Thomas Stewart*

Jason Riley challenges the value of affirmative action and liberal social reform precisely 50 years after their birth as part of the “Great Society” conceived by President Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration in 1964 and 1965. At the time, it was said that it would take 40 to 50 years to truly measure their impact. That time span has now passed, and Riley’s verdict is a harsh one.

The book reminds the reader of the challenges facing many African Americans today, including high unemployment, staggering neighborhood crime and violence, and large percentages of children growing up in low-income single-parent households. As a reviewer for *Education Next*, I was particularly interested in Riley’s treatment of education policy and its consequences. Among the education topics he discusses are the black-white achievement gap, education reform strategies, improving outcomes for African American students, and affirmative action in higher education.

The general premise of *Please Stop Helping Us* is that “liberal” social policies specifically targeting African Americans have done more harm than good. He “examines the track record of the political left’s serial altruism over the past half century.” Riley evaluates these policies by combining evidence



from leading social-science research with personal stories about his experiences as a black male. He provides moving examples of what it was like for him growing up in a single-parent household, being teased for acting and sounding white because of his commitment to academic excellence, and having direct encounters with both sides of crime and violence in America. I find his stories and many of his claims compelling, and I encourage anyone interested in these matters to pick up a copy, as it challenges conventional wisdom at every turn.

Still, the work has its limitations. First, his charge against liberal advocates is overly generalized. Often he seems to treat any and all Democrats as equally guilty. With regard to K–12 education reform, for example, it is not accurate to cast all Democrats as people who oppose charter schools and school vouchers. Riley offers the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) as an example of a school-choice initiative denounced by “liberals.” But the reality is a good

deal more nuanced than that, as my own research has shown. The OSP is the first federally funded voucher program in America, and it was launched in the District of Columbia in 2004. The District of Columbia is a heavily Democratic-leaning school district and city, and OSP would not have been established there without the support of key leading local Democrats. Many of these leaders, in fact, came together to create a “three-sector [education] strategy” that focused on 1) securing greater federal support for traditional public schools, 2) creating a facilities fund for public charters, and 3) providing low-income families a scholarship or voucher to attend private schools. The goal was to create “one of the best systems of schools in the country.” The author must give these liberals due credit here.

Riley also lacks clarity regarding who is the “us” in the title and his criteria for assessing the impact of “help” or affirmative action. The title of Riley’s book suggests that *help* is a bad word, and I agree that blind, uninformed, and politically motivated sources of help have led to some egregiously misdirected public policies. But once again a more nuanced analysis is called for. Not all forms of help are equally misguided. Government programs can be delivered in ways that range from highly paternalistic to completely hands-off. Riley seems to prefer the latter, but neither extreme is the ideal design for interventions geared toward income-disadvantaged urban families.

Riley’s critique of affirmative action is right on target, though he sometimes vacillates between treating African Americans as a monolithic community

## book reviews

and a community made up of either low-income or middle-class members. It is my understanding that affirmative action in higher education was an extension of the War on Poverty, which was expected to provide students from low-income families with greater access to predominantly white colleges and universities. It was assumed that low-income, first-generation African American college graduates would return to their families and communities, providing inspiration and uplift for others. But in the early 1970s many universities circumvented the original spirit of affirmative action by recruiting African American students from more affluent backgrounds and those who had attended majority-white high schools. It was thought that these students could be more easily assimilated into the university world. Thus, in practice, affirmative action did not enlarge but rather cut

the neighborhood-to-college pipeline for talented, low-income African Americans, who could fulfill the original spirit of the concept.

Overall, the author's critique of affirmative action exposes the limitations of liberal public policies. As he notes, "Much more disturbing is that half a century after the civil rights battles were fought and won, liberalism remains much more interested in making excuses for blacks than in reevaluating efforts to help them." His many examples stand as an indictment of liberal proponents of the country's affirmative action and other social programs.

Less obviously, it also stands as a critique, even more specifically, of African American parents, leaders, and organizations. Riley argues in no uncertain language that "black cultural attitudes toward work, authority, dress, sex and violence have also

proven counterproductive, inhibiting the development of the kind of human capital that has led to socioeconomic advancement for other groups." With the bleak picture of the African American community that he paints, one might conclude that Riley's book offers only a dim light to guide us forward. Yet his greatest contribution is to raise a critical question: How do we change the mind-set and behaviors of specific members of the African American community? Highlighting the hard questions is the first step toward answering them. For this, Riley should be commended.

*Thomas Stewart is president of Patten University in Oakland, California, and co-author with Patrick J. Wolf of The School Choice Journey: School Vouchers and the Empowerment of Urban Families (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).*

## Program on Education Policy & Governance

### Post Doctoral Opportunities:

*PEPG offers a one-year resident fellowship at the postdoctoral level starting each fall.*

*The fellow will work with PEPG staff at their Harvard University offices and engage in independent research related to the program's focus as well as collaborate with the Program's ongoing research and activities.*

*For more information visit:*

[hks.harvard.edu/pepg/postdoc.htm](http://hks.harvard.edu/pepg/postdoc.htm)

VISIT US ON THE WEB

[www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg)

**New Research:** [www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/research.htm](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/research.htm)

**Program Events:** [www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/events.htm](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/events.htm)

