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Planning — May 2009

How America Finally Solved Its Race Problem

By Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper

In 2110 the U.S., changing a few words in what was originally a 1901 gospel song, adopted a national anthem that was more uplifting than its original one. The new song was "We Have Overcome."

In its second century, the American planning field saw extraordinary events: the shrinkage of Philadelphia and Tampa to village size; the ensuing Great Scale-Up that created serious national and regional planning; the parallel emergence of the land consumer movement; the revival of Ohio; the triumph of the Buffalo Commons in the Great Plains.

No story was more remarkable than the one that led to the new anthem. It opened in the second decade of the 21st century in the Lower Mississippi River Delta. In 1986, the rock poet Paul Simon sang in "Graceland" that "the Delta shines like a national guitar." In 1948 Mississippi's David Cohn said that the Delta's core goes from the lobby of Memphis's Peabody Hotel to Catfish Row in Vicksburg, Mississippi — still true more than a century and a half later.

The Delta runs east and west along the Mississippi River, stretching across parts of seven states, from Illinois, Kentucky, and Missouri in the north 750 miles through Arkansas and Tennessee to Louisiana and Mississippi in the south. Many Delta counties had black majorities or near-majorities deep into the 21st century. The mainly rural and small-town Delta — and its attendant racism, violence, and poverty — vividly formed countless artists, writers, and musicians, both black and white.

The Endless Flood and its aftermath

In the Delta the river always has the last word. That was certainly true during its legendary floods of 1861, 1927, and 1973. The performance of the Delta's dams, canals, locks, and levees determined its prospects, as if in Egypt. All failed in 2019's Endless Flood, so called because it never seemed to ebb. It destroyed every major Delta city along the Mississippi, from Memphis to New Orleans, and much of the region's agriculture.

The rebuilding of the Delta gripped the nation. The Delta Planning Board was formed immediately after the 2019 flood and by midcentury it had become the nation's most powerful regional planning agency.

The board's new emphasis on land use, ecological restoration, and innovative laser work approaches to the river averted destruction from major floods, particularly after the agency took control of the Delta operations of the now-defunct Army Corps of Engineers. At the turn of the 22nd century, it was clear that the Grand Reconciliation — as the rebuilding movement was called — had made the Delta's recovery the most successful large redevelopment project in American history.

The Grand Reconciliation created a vast new interracial Great Reverse Migration that stemmed the Delta's population outflow, inspiring the baby boomers' children and later generations to spend their years of national service in the Delta, invest in it, and retire there. The rebuilt cities of Memphis and the re-sited New Orleans flourished as gateways to the region, with Baton Rouge, Natchez, and Vicksburg as its nodes.

The Grand Reconciliation enlarged many kinds of Delta tourism: musical, literary, antebellum, slavery, Civil War, civil rights, great house, Native American, food, farming, and environmental. It fostered culture, including schools of computer art, kudzu-based architecture, and the newly influential social science of improving race relations.

Because of the Grand Reconciliation the Delta bloomed in ways the nation had never seen. Americans responded to the flood with a will to overcome the horrors they had allowed to occur after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. If they again had not prevented a flood, at least they could improve on the aftermath.

The Delta showed the country and the world how racial integration really worked. By 2065, the widely celebrated bicentennial of Appomattox, it had assimilated its fast-growing Latino population, then a third of the region. The lessons took elsewhere in the country. They arrived slowly, well after the nation's 2076 tricentennial, in the urban North and Midwest. But in the end the Delta set an effective national example for decency, goodwill, optimism, and hard work. It became a secular (and also highly religious) version of Paul Simon's Graceland, a place where all sufferers went to be received and redeemed.

Free at last

The ceremony adopting "We Have Overcome" as the national anthem took place on the National Mall amid the cherry blossoms. The president was an Austrian-Comanche-American, a self-made trillionaire from Delta Tennessee and a founder of the dominant New Lincoln Party. From the steps of the King Memorial, she addressed a spillover crowd estimated at five million. Allsenovision carried her speech to a global audience more than 1,000 times as large, nearly half the world's population.

President Alta Koch spoke in her soft Delta drawl: "Welcome *y bienvenido*. Today we renew our vast national journey: *e pluribus unum* — Out of Many, One. I want to mention some of our



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compatriots on what Dr. King called the long walk to freedom. We must never forget the millions who lived and died in the Delta and elsewhere to make this day possible.

"Condoleeza Rice — do any of you remember who she was? — regarded slavery as America's original sin, its moral birth defect. To the memory of W.E.B. Du Bois, we say with assurance that today America no longer has the color line you rightly saw as the 20th century's worldwide curse. In our country it lasted much too long into the 21st. Please join me and the Marian Anderson Choir in singing the first verse and chorus of our new national anthem." And a great roar went up:

We have overcome,

We have overcome,

We have overcome today.

Oh, deep in my heart,

I do believe,

We have overcome today.

Deborah E. Popper teaches geography at the College of Staten Island/City University of New York and Princeton University. Frank J. Popper teaches land-use planning at Rutgers and Princeton universities. The Poppers originated the Buffalo Commons idea. They are at work on a book on six American regions, including the Delta and the Plains.

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