Hurricane Katrina’s violent winds and waters tore away the shrouds that ordinarily veil America’s racial pattern of poverty and neglect. Understandably, most commentators and the public focused on the woeful federal response. Others, taking a longer view, yearn for a burst of accommodation patterned on the New Deal. But that nostalgia requires a heavy dose of historical amnesia. It also misses the chance to come to terms with how the federal government in the 1930s and 1940s contributed to the persistence of two Americas.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Ira Katznelson, a Princeton University political scientist, documented the history of the glass ceiling that flattened the ascent of blacks into homes, sub-marginal homeownership, and small business ownership, despite federal programs on the grounds that they were premised on the idea of promoting equal opportunity and economic mobility. Without an unsentimental historical understanding of the policy roots of black isolation and dispossession, and with our current tragic situation, it is essential to cut the Gordian knot joining race and class, our national responses to Katrina and the Gulf Coast states will remain no more a gesture.

Faculty Perspective

By Ira Katznelson

American middle class by providing opportunities for education and homeownership to the 16 million soldiers after World War II. Katznelson writes that “there was no greater instrument for widening an already huge racial gap in postwar America than the GI Bill.” This was because Southern lawmakers had insisted that local officials impose on returning black soldiers and to a general unwillingness to offer loans to blacks even when such loans were insured by the federal government. One significant reason why this was allowed to happen was that local officials were constrained by their belief that “you are not taking a person’s property if you let them make a mistake.” This is unsettling history, he said.

Katznelson’s book, to “imagine and craft the possibilities that guide us to a better place.” He went on to reiterate that “we all share the responsibility of making the necessary social remedies to hurricane victims. Housing mobility vouchers, for example, are premised in legal concepts based on the rights of individuals and householders. As the African-American middle class, the affirmative action we did get has done more to advance fair treatment across racial lines than any other recent public policy, and thus demands our respect and support. But as the scenes from New Orleans vividly displayed, so many who were left out before have been left out again.

Rather than yearn for New Deal policies that were tainted by the belief that even recall the civil rights and affirmative action successes of the 1960s and 1970s, Katznelson argued that “the policy root of black isolation and dispossession, and with our current tragic situation, it is essential to cut the Gordian knot joining race and class, our national responses to Katrina and the Gulf Coast states will remain no more a gesture.”
As New Deal politicians began constructing government programs to deal with welfare, work, and war in the 1930s and 1940s, they deliberately excluded or treated differently the vast majority of African Americans. The central reason, according to Katznelson, was because Democratic leaders needed the support of southern representatives in Congress to pass their ambitious legislative programs. The result was that federal aid in the South became contingent on southern Jim Crow. At the exact moment when the “activist” state was giving whites the tools to create a robust middle class, African Americans were being systematically isolated from the benefits of public assistance. Stated differently, “affirmative action” did not emerge as a new program in the late 1960s. The New Deal was a series of programs, public work projects, financial reforms, and regulations enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States between 1933 and 1939. Major federal programs and agencies included the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Civil Works Administration (CWA), the Farm Security Administration (FSA), the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (NIRA) and the Social Security Administration (SSA). They provided support for farmers, the unemployed, youth and Instead, the New Deal did the opposite. The FHA promoted racial covenants and other instruments of segregation through underwriting standards discouraging home loans in areas “infiltrated” by “inharmonious racial or nationality groups.” The rationale was the government’s need to protect its investment, and those of white homeowners, against the threat African American neighbors would pose to property values. Two decades of Democratic dominance in Washington were indeed a time “When Affirmative Action Was White,” as the title of historian Ira Katznelson’s 2005 book about the period suggests. And, as Rothstein shows, the effects lingered for decades. Homeownership was a key path to wealth in postwar America, yet many blacks were excluded. The Harvard affirmative action trial parsing claims the school discriminates against Asian-American applicants culminates decades of white Americans erasing the history of their own debt to government largesse under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. White Americans Were Affirmative Action’s Original Beneficiaries. Now, Many of Them Want It Dead. By Zak Cheney-Rice. Abigail Fisher in front of the United States Supreme Court. Photo: J. Scott Applewhite/AP/REX/Shutterstock. Affirmative action is dying a slow death, and its goals are far from realized. The New Deal was a series of programs and projects instituted during the Great Depression by President Franklin D. Roosevelt that aimed to restore prosperity to Americans. A Second New Deal was put in place shortly thereafter as a way to continue the country’s economic recovery. Over the next eight years, the government instituted a series of experimental New Deal projects and programs, such as the CCC, the WPA, the TVA, the SEC and others. Roosevelt’s New Deal fundamentally and permanently changed the U.S. federal government by expanding its size and scope especially its role in the economy. New Deal for the American People.