



# THE VIEW

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## REPAIRING HOUSES DIVIDED

BY

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It was a lazy, late summer Saturday afternoon and I was dawdling through the television channels as I intermittently nodded off for a nap. I happened upon a discussion on one of the C-Span channels that got a grip on me and refused to let me go back to sleep.

The topic being discussed was the report of recent research conducted by Robert D. Putnam, the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. Putnam is the immediate past President of the American Political Science Association, and he is perhaps best known by the reading public as the scholar who authored *Bowling Alone*, a book about the decline of social capital in America and how we are increasingly becoming disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our Democratic structures. The Robert Putnam research being discussed on this balmy Saturday was quite a bit more ominous than that contained in *Bowling Alone*. This new report was titled *E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century*.

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam discusses the concept of social capital as being “bonding capital,” which occurs as a result of socializing with people who are like you in terms of race, religion, age, etc. or “bridging capital,” which is when you make friends with people who are not like you.

The *E Pluribus Unum* report holds that although ethnic diversity is increasing in most countries, social solidarity and social capital are tending to decrease. In his acceptance speech for the 2006 Johan Skytte Prize, Putnam said, “In ethnically diverse neighborhoods residents of all races tend to ‘hunker down.’ Trust is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, and friends fewer”.

The good news from Professor Putnam is that, “...in the long run ethnically diverse societies have overcome such fragmentation by creating new, cross-cutting forms of social solidarity and more encompassing identities.”

It is a somewhat sobering experience to hear “scientific confirmation” that simply making all of our laws “color blind” is not alone sufficient to produce a unified society where diverse communities thrive. The implication is that, here in America, we tend to simply stay inside our homes rather than make the effort to bridge the distance between those who may in some way be different from us. The upshot is a loss of community, not only among diverse groups but even within our own ethnic groups. It should be noted that Putnam’s research and its implications were not confined to the United States.

If I were inclined to ignore this thought provoking discussion recent events would command me to do otherwise. An article on the front page of the September 9 edition of the New York Times analyzed the success of the troop buildup in Iraq. A great deal of the success in Baghdad was attributed to the walls that were set up around many neighborhoods and the purging of various religious and ethnic groups from these neighborhoods. The article was accompanied by a color-coded map to enable the reader to locate Sunni neighborhoods, Shiite neighborhoods and those controlled by the Mahdi Army. But, alas, we can find examples much closer to home than that.

The recent events in Jena, Louisiana have reminded us of an era that we all thought, and indeed, hoped was well behind us. When African American students violated the space known as the “white tree,” which white students at Jena High School considered as their private congregating space, racially divisive action ensued. First, hangman’s nooses showed up in the tree, followed by words and then fisticuffs between white and black students. White students involved were punished through normal school channels while the black students found themselves in court facing serious charges carrying potential sentences of years, if not decades. Absent the differences in skin color we would have likely never heard of the case of the Jena Six.

Racial differences have been in the news lately in Mississippi as they relate to the state’s political structure. Recent court cases involving activities related to elections in Mississippi have, according to many observers, nudged the state’s parties closer to a virtually all white Republican Party and a mostly black Democratic Party.

Thankfully, Professor Putnam has a research-based prescription for addressing these issues. He quotes British Chair of Equality and Civil Rights, Trevor Phillips as saying that we need to give members of our communities opportunities to meet and want to be with people with whom they have something in common that is not defined by their ethnicity. Public policy has a distinct role in eliminating any tradeoff between race and community. Putnam cites research that shows how community centers, athletic facilities, schools and other common areas can be effective instruments for playing the role of bridging social capital. In Mississippi football fields, gymnasiums, and school auditoria give us chances to celebrate successes that we hold in common and hence redraw more inclusive lines of social and community identity.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

He is married to the former Bonnie Parker, and they have two children. He is active in the United Methodist Church.

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