

# American history narrative essay

[History](#), [American History](#)



Stirring upon intellectual, political, financial, societal, and cultural trends in around three hundred and fifty pages, *The House I Live In* provides an intuitive, if somewhat unpersuasive, review of American race relations over the past century and a half. The narrative is appealing, with considerable awareness devoted to popular culture at the start of the chapters. Robert J. Norrell's historical characters are outlined with the nimble brushstrokes of a capable historian, confident of his ability to attract the consideration of nonacademic readers whilst not losing the regard of academics.

Although this study is partial mainly to black and white relations rather than the broader topic his title suggests, Norrell achieves his stated intention to "offer a broad view of the quest for equal rights for African Americans and connect those efforts to big, evolving structural realities of the twentieth century" (p. xii). His general idea will influence future scholarship even as specialists jump on his isolated errors as well as question his tendentious and often unconvincing explanations.

Norrell attempts to explain how "racial competition for economic opportunity, political power, and the use of physical space" have served as a continuing offset to the American "creed of democratic values—liberty, democracy, and equality" (pp. xii, xiii). Norrell's fuller interpretive framework, influenced by Max Weber, concedes the significance of monetary and political factors, but the central theme of *The House I Live In* is the gradual alteration of existing notions of the American democratic creed.

He implies that the capability of a few leaders to affirm widely shared perceptions of this creed while also broadening its scope to include African Americans accounts for the progress that has occurred in American race

relations. Norrell argues that Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address achieved "a fundamental change in what Americans would believe thereafter" (p. 13); even though he recognizes that Lincoln's reformulation of Jeffersonian egalitarianism did not prevent white supremacy during the late nineteenth century.

Norrell's account gives limited thought to the internal dynamics of African American politics during this period. African American civil rights proponents such as Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells are discussed in passing, while Booker T. Washington is depicted as the intellectual leader who provoked the surfacing of an effective black challenge to white supremacy.

According to Norrell, Washington succeeded because of his insistence that African Americans were simply another ethnic group rather than a distinctive racial one and his "faith that democratic values, as defined by Abraham Lincoln, provided the ideological foundation most likely to enable black uplift" (pp. 63–64). Rather than an accommodationist, Washington was a remarkably prophetic leader who anticipated "virtually all of the naacp's [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] later successful protest agenda" (p. 64).

Norrell argues that in contrast to the exclusiveness and racial romanticism of the "black ethnic nationalist" W. E. B. Du Bois, "Washington's strategy more nearly encompassed the ambitions of all African Americans" (p. 64). Historians have long been aware that Washington was multifaceted as well as duplicitous, but the Tuskegee principal's posthumous influence was less evident in the naacp and subsequent civil rights groups than in Marcus

Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which Norrell dismisses as "the strongest example of black ethnic nationalism" (p. 93).

Norrell's explanation of black-white dealings during the period after World War II displays a similar inclination to downplay the importance of black leaders who questioned whether white Americans' democratic ideals reliably shaped American racial realities. Frank Sinatra's 1945 song and film promoting tolerance provides Norrell's title and central theme, but it is misleading for Norrell to devote more attention to Sinatra than to Paul Robeson, the key figure in the American Crusade against Lynching, who is introduced lamely as "the black opera singer known also for his radical politics" (pp.

145–46). During the 1950s, Martin Luther King Jr. , emerged as a seminal black leader "who would shape the ideological understandings of American race relations for the remainder of the twentieth century. " But Norrell is clearly hostile to the radical currents in black political thought that would, during the last half of the 1960s, separate King and other black activists from Lincolnian democratic values. He sees King as abandoning "'American' ideology" (p.

251) by advocating wealth redistribution, while the black leaders who rose to prominence after King's death are broadly painted as black (or ethnic) nationalists. Norrell describes the Black Panther Party as a murderous group—without evidence he claims "the Panthers killed more police than they themselves lost" (p. 262)—formed in 1967 (actually 1966) by the "petty criminal" Huey Newton. Black mayors and other elected officials are broadly

depicted as "black nationalist politicians" who "sometimes promoted black solidarity through explicitly racial appeals" (p.

273). Norrell is probably correct to see the shared democratic ideals of America as one explanation for the decline of the Jim Crow system, but Lincolnian democratic values have coexisted with the Jim Crow system and with the massive rightward shift of white political allegiance that has occurred during the past four decades. Moreover, the African American radicalism Norrell dismisses provides a compelling analysis of the persistence of blackpoverty, de facto segregation, and enduring racial inequities after the era of civil rights reforms.

Although he seeks to explain what "Americans did right to overcome our legacy of racial exploitation," his own dour assessment of contemporary race relations reveals the limitations of American democratic ideology as a force for progress in race relations: "It was a sad reality that, as far as Americans had moved in overcoming the fundamental problems of race by the end of the twentieth century, they seemed to have reached the limits of their values, the disagreement over the meaning of equality appeared to have exposed a tragic flaw in the American character, the inability to settle finally on a path to a just and equitable society" (p.

329). Source Used *The House I Live In: Race in the American Century*. By Robert J. Norrell. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. xx, 379 pp. ISBN 0-19-507345-2. )