well: 62 percent of adults over 30, 43 percent of young adults, but only 33 percent of teens claimed to be familiar with the news story about which they were asked. Teens were also more likely to get the question wrong even if they claimed familiarity—only 50 percent of them answered correctly, compared to 60 percent for the older age groups.

One surprising finding: Patterson found much less reliance on the Internet as a news source than he expected. Among people who claimed familiarity with a given news story, teens were no more likely than young adults to have first encountered it on the Web. In both age brackets, only 18 percent claimed to have read it there first. The percentage of teenagers who had first seen the story on TV—41 percent—dwarfed that figure. More teenagers also learned of news stories by word of mouth: 28 percent, compared to 12 percent for young adults and just 4 percent for older adults. Also “conspicuously missing” from the list of important news sources for teens and young adults were “alternative news sources” such as the Daily Show and other programs that mix news and comedy. (A 2004 study by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press famously found that Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 relied more heavily on such shows for news about the presidential campaign than they did on Internet news sites.) “The notion that young adults get their news from a different distribution system is not borne out by our evidence,” Patterson writes. “A shift in sources is occurring, and it is in the direction of the new media, but the larger tide has been the movement away from a daily news habit.”

Some news reports cast Patterson’s findings in a positive light, pointing out that 54 percent of the teenagers surveyed reported at least skimming a newspaper “less than once a week” or more frequently (as opposed to “hardly ever” or “never”). The numbers for other media were even higher. But Patterson says that glancing at a newspaper once every two weeks is not enough to make informed citizens. “This report,” he concludes, “will be a source of unease for those concerned about journalism and democracy in America.”

To those who say teens have never cared about the news, Patterson offers similar surveys, predating cable TV, that show young Americans’ awareness of the news was much closer to that of adults. For instance, Martin P. Wattenberg, a political scientist at the University of California-Irvine, notes in his book Is Voting for Young People? that in 1967, 64 percent of respondents who were 15 to 24 watched a network news broadcast nightly, compared to percentages ranging from 68 to 79 for older adults.

Patterson believes this was due to what he calls “force feeding” of news—an entire generation of teenagers who wanted to watch TV watched the news for an hour each evening because that was all that was on. Today’s teenagers have cable, personal TV sets in their bedrooms, or both. Although some percentage of teens will undoubtedly take greater interest in the news once they grow up and realize its importance, teens as a group, Patterson concludes, are not developing the “news habit” their parents’ generation did. He ends the report with a quotation from Aristotle: “We are what we repeatedly do.”

—ELIZABETH HUDRAIS

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BLACK BETRAYAL?

The “Sellout”

IN THE hazardous waters of American race politics, a particular danger shadows the successful black American who achieves status and acclaim in mainstream society. Too much approval from “white” society quickly yields suspicions of racial treachery. The black “sellout” suffers a form of cultural banishment—a cruel psychic punishment for an ill-defined crime.

In his forthcoming book, Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal (Pantheon), professor of law Randall Kennedy examines the uses and abuses of the “sellout” label from the days of slavery to the present. He seeks to differentiate potentially valid applications of the term (for instance, when a member of a subjugated group consciously betrays that group’s interests) from the careless rhetoric that characterizes many contemporary accusations. Only rarely, he argues, is the justice of a “sellout” indictment unambiguous. Kennedy’s interest in the “sellout” phe-
The phenomenon emerged from earlier projects—most notably, his 2002 book *Nigger: The Strange History of a Troublesome Word* and 2003’s *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption*—which dissected some of the most resonant, but seldom examined, codes of race relations in America. Kennedy adds that he has felt the sting of the label himself, most recently in response to his stated support for interracial adoption.

In tracing the evolution of the “sellout” through black American history, Kennedy finds the term applied to a wide range of offenses, from the personal to the political. Frederick Douglass, the preeminent black abolitionist, for example, was labeled a turncoat by many African Americans for marrying a white woman. At the other extreme, William Hannibal Thomas was condemned as a race traitor for his 1901 treatise on the inferiority of blacks (*The American Negro: What He Was, What He Is, and What He Will Become*), a book that won him praise from white supremacists at the time.

Yet despite apparent fickleness in the use of the term over time, Kennedy is not prepared to discard the notion of the “sellout” altogether. “So long as you have self-conscious communities,” he argues, “there must be something to define who’s in and who’s out.” Any worthy movement for social change relies on the threat of ostracism to maintain group cohesion. Neither the French Resistance in World War II nor the Montgomery bus boycott, he points out, would have been possible without this powerful tool of moral suasion.

Are there black Americans today who deserve the indictment? After touching on Condoleezza Rice and Barack Obama, Kennedy examines U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, whose name, he notes, has become “synonymous with the idea” of the black sellout. Prominent African-American leaders, including civil-rights activists, politicians, ministers, journalists, and entertainers have vilified Thomas, primarily for his opposition to affirmative action—an issue that Kennedy says has become the “litmus test” of racial solidarity in black Amer-
ica. They accuse Thomas of “rejoicing in burning the bridges that brought him over.”

While making clear that he doesn’t agree with Thomas’s positions, Kennedy rejects the basis for the “sellout” charge. Thomas, he argues, should be judged on the merits and flaws of his arguments (particularly his claims to an “originalist” understanding of the unconstitutionality of affirmative action), rather than on whether or not he benefited from a policy he repudiates. For Thomas to qualify as a “sellout,” Kennedy declares, detractors would have to prove that he “knowingly” and “intentionally” worked to harm the interests of black Americans. They have not. Instead, Kennedy suggests, much of the condemnation of Thomas stems from a profound sense of disappointment that such a highly successful member of the black community has failed to conform to group expectations. (Kennedy points out that a majority of blacks, in fact, supported Thomas against Anita Hill’s sexual harassment allegations, viewing Hill as the “sellout” for breaking ranks by informing on a fellow black. That upswing in black support gave Thomas the small but essential edge he needed for confirmation.)

With Sellout, Kennedy hopes to bring the contradictory terms of racial betrayal in America into clear view. “At some point or another,” he says, “every successful black American in a multiracial context confronts the collaborator suspicion: ‘Why is this person successful?’” Too often, feelings of group pride in an individual’s achievements go hand in hand with questions of racial loyalty that can quickly lead to the unsubstantiated branding of a “sellout.” Kennedy argues that this damaging label should be reserved only for the most egregious offenses, and backed up with hard evidence. “Words,” he says, “should matter.”

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