

America's Ideology of Racism: Our Most Treasured Possession

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By

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I speak these words in the spirit of caring enough to confront. As I do so I am compelled to remind you that confrontation is not a prelude to combat but is instead a wake-up call, an alarm bell to alert you that unchecked, the virulence of racism will complete its assigned mission to destroy this republic. And, I am here to remind those of you who have embraced the “progress narrative” that the passage of time does not guarantee change; change happens as a result of informed, committed action on the part of people who care enough to confront those who have opted to support and sustain the ideology of racism.

In the aftermath of the Civil War the 39th Congress of the United States submitted a bill that would provide civil rights to the recently enslaved and now newly freed men, women and children of African descent. The bill stipulated that this group of formerly enslaved people would be classified as citizens but as to whether they would enjoy all the rights and privileges that such status would convey would quickly become a point of contention. The first iteration of the bill was presented to President Andrew Johnson in 1865 and was promptly vetoed by him. He

vetoed the 1866 version as well but the Congress was able to muster the required two-thirds vote of the combined houses and the bill became law in 1866. This was the first Federal law defining citizenship in the United States. Here is how the law was described by historian Eric Foner: “The first statutory definition of American citizenship, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, declared all persons born in the United States (except Indians) national citizens and spelled out rights they were to enjoy equally without regard to race.”¹ This action was followed by the addition of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution in 1868; this was seen as the most definitive statement to date about the citizenship rights of formerly enslaved people.

So far, it seems that things are on track to ensure that black people who were now free of the bonds of slavery will be granted all the rights that citizens enjoy. But you know as well as I do that this was not to be the case. There was something in the national character that could not or would not accept black people as full citizens. Nonetheless, those who were and had been engaged in the struggle for civil rights continued to fight. The evidence is there in the passage of more civil rights acts, more barriers to full participation by all citizens removed, much clearer rhetoric in support of those who were denied access to opportunities on myriad levels of society.

But, all of this has not proven to be especially fruitful; we continue to be a nation divided by multiple lines of separation, not the least of which is that of legalized racial group identity. The division is further amplified by a rather rigid hierarchy wherein the racial groups are arranged by category from most desirable to least

¹ Foner, Eric, *The Story of American Freedom*, W.W. Norton and Company, NY, 1998, pg. 105

desirable. And this is not a consequence of choice by those who find themselves assigned, arbitrarily, to one or another such group. It is entirely a function of the system as it has been designed by those who have had the power and willingness to do so.

Further, the very concept itself, “civil rights,” which suggests a preferred state of being for an entire national population, is in fact today coded language for offering, belatedly, opportunities for people of color and others to be included as equals in the body politic. And, as it has been demonstrated time after time, this is not something that a majority of citizens find to be palatable. In 1954, in the wake of the Brown decision, many voices of opposition were raised in the halls of Congress, fears about the dangers of “race mixing” were expressed from pulpits, academic podiums, boardrooms, neighborhood homeowners associations, PTA meetings, and in the taverns and beer halls all over this country.

Why, you might ask, does this situation remain? What drives a nation to be so blind to universal moral truths? Yes, civil rights laws have been passed with the intention of offering relief to black people on many fronts. That point is not in dispute. What is in dispute, however, is whether those actions have led to meaningful change given the ongoing influence of systems, institutions, philosophies, practices, and ideologies developed over time in support of maintaining the status quo.

I invite you to consider an element that may help to clarify why a growing body of civil rights law has not resulted in radical changes in our society. Law appeals first and foremost to reason and objectivity. The unfortunate truth is that civil rights law involves issues that bypass the seat of reason and objectivity for most people

– the cerebral cortex – and winds up instead being processed by elements of the limbic system – the seat of emotion and memory.

If it were simply and only a matter of reason, and if the majority of citizens were reasonable beings, it is quite likely that “civil rights” would be an artifact of the distant past. The logic upon which the laws were based would have persuaded the body politic to accept the rationale that all people were indeed intended to enjoy the freedoms and liberties available to most and our historical tale would be a very different narrative indeed. But our history is what it is, and in large measure, because it is an unexamined history, we are saddled with the onerous status quo that we experience today.

James McCune Smith, an African American physician and pharmacist, saw what could happen when the mind turns from reason to create mental images of black people that have nothing whatsoever to do with objective reality. In 1852 he wrote:

“The negro ‘with us’ is not an actual physical being of flesh and bones and blood, but a hideous monster of the mind, ugly beyond all physical portraying, so utterly and ineffably monstrous as to frighten reason from its throne, and justice from its balance, and mercy from its hallowed temple, and to blot out shame and probity, and the eternal sympathies of nature, so far as these things have presence in the breasts and being of American republicans! No sir! It is a constructive negro – a John Roe and Richard Doe negro, that haunts

with grim presence the precincts of this republic, shaking his gory locks over legislative halls and family prayers.”²

Smith was able to see the profound impact of internalized belief systems as they were played out in his 19th century existence. Akin to his report we have the following statement from a man soon to be our 16th president, Abraham Lincoln, in a speech to an audience in Springfield, Illinois:

“Mammon is after him; ambition follows, and philosophy follows, and the Theology of the day is fast joining the cry. They have him in his prison house; they have searched his person, and left no prying instrument with him. One after another they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him, and now they have him, as it were, bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys, which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every key; the keys in the hands of a hundred different men, and they scattered to a hundred different and distant places; and they stand musing as to what invention, in all the dominions of mind and matter, can be produced to make the impossibility of his escape more complete than it is.”³

Lincoln made his statement in 1857 in the wake of the Dred Scott decision. He could not have known how prescient a statement he was making at the time. But, as we extrapolate from the reports of both these men, we see vestiges of their realities being played out in this year, 2022. Among the questions we must ask at this juncture is whether or not these messages from our past can be helpful as we seek to make changes in the arena of civil rights. I am certain we will find

² James McCune Smith, *Frederick Douglass Paper* (1852)

³ Basler, ed., *Works of Abraham Lincoln*, “Speech of June 20, 1857,” II, 404; quoted in Michael P. Johnson & James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South*, W.W. Norton & Company, NY, 1984, pg. 164

clues about how to proceed if we are willing to care enough to confront self and each other about our distorted views of our own history. One prevailing narrative of our time is the idea that positive change is taking place over time; that as we “mature” as a people, we rid ourselves of the worst traits. Does an objective assessment of history support such a narrative? Does believing this story make it impossible for a person to see evidence to the contrary?

“It is imperative that we understand that racism is a congenital deformity that has crippled this country since its inception.⁴ For the good of America it is necessary to refute the idea that the dominant ideology in our country is freedom and equality while racism is just an occasional departure from the norm on the part of a few bigoted extremists.⁵” These words from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s seminal work printed in 1967, “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community,” are emphasized by others who Dr. King quotes in this same publication. Listen to what Dr. George Kelsey has to say in his book *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*: “Racism is a faith. It is a form of idolatry. Initially it was an ideological justification for the constellation of political and economic power which were expressed in colonialism and slavery. But gradually the idea of the superior race was heightened and deepened in meaning and value so that it pointed beyond the historical structures of relation, in which it emerged, to human existence itself.⁶”

I urge you to imagine a new community, one in which all members are deserving of the right to be called American with no hyphen, no contingency, no assignment

⁴ King, Martin Luther, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1967 pg 68

⁵ King, pg 69

⁶ Kelsey, Dr. George, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, quoted in King, pg 69

to racial groups. And if you are indeed able to imagine such a reality, you will have made the first step toward real, meaningful change.