

Coming to Terms with Our History

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During the past decade, and particularly in the last year, the long-standing discussion about race in America has intensified and become the dominant issue in almost every part of our country and around the world. A series of events across the country in which African Americans have been killed in confrontations with law enforcement officers has resulted a widespread protest movement and demands to “Defund the Police.” Those behind this movement have created a narrative that African Americans are being unfairly targeted by “racist” police. More significantly, the “racist police” narrative has morphed into a general condemnation of America on the basis that everything about our nation is racist. Over the past year this narrative has become accepted by many, even including some generally conservative Americans.

Many Americans believe that this narrative is totally false. While there are certainly bad policemen as there are bad lawyers, bad doctors and bad educators, the overwhelming majority of Americans in law enforcement are good, well-intentioned people who have a difficult job to do, but who are doing their best to serve our country and its communities. Some reforms in police procedures may be appropriate, but the wholesale “defund the police” policies would not be a positive development, particularly for the African American citizens who live in high crime neighborhoods across the country.

That the “racist police” narrative is put forth is remarkable because many of the so-called “racist” police and their superiors, including their chiefs of police¹ and mayors,² are African Americans themselves. Moreover, the protesters fail to acknowledge the fact that approximately 37.4% of the violent crime in America is committed by African Americans³ who constitute only 13.4% of the population,⁴ making it reasonable that a higher per capita percentage of African Americans are killed by police who are responding to violent crimes. While we all regret the deaths of those who have died in confrontations with police, even the deaths of those with long criminal records, these deaths constitute only a minor fraction of the enormous number of violent deaths in America for which our law enforcement professionals are charged with trying to prevent.

Further, the general condemnation that America today is racist is very unfair. Our nation provides more freedom and more opportunity for all of its citizens than any other country in the world. That is why so many people from other nations are clamoring to come here. Additionally, for more than half a century, African Americans have enjoyed the benefit of affirmative action programs, both formal and informal. These programs have had a very positive effect, elevating millions of African Americans to higher

¹ The Minneapolis Chief of Police at the time of the death of George Floyd was African American. Seattle’s African American Chief of Police resigned because of the criticism and cutbacks that her department was facing.

² The Mayor of Chicago at the time of the riots by protestors in that city is African American. The Mayor of Atlanta where the shooting of an African American man by police occurred this year is also an African American.

³ Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018 Crime in the United States, Table 43.

⁴ United States Census Bureau estimate as of July 1, 2019.

positions and better incomes than they would otherwise have enjoyed. Thus, the narrative that today's America is racist is clearly false.

Our nation could have – and should have – been celebrating the end of racial discrimination as evidenced by the election and reelection of an African American president. Moreover, we should celebrate the fact that African Americans hold many top positions in corporations, government, education, entertainment, athletics, and the professions. We in South Carolina should celebrate that we recently elected an African American United States Senator by a substantial margin. We should also celebrate that we elected a woman of Indian descent as our governor. Indeed, there is substantial evidence that racism in America and in South Carolina has been radically reduced over the last half century to the point that only a miniscule minority of white Americans and South Carolinians can be fairly called racist in their core beliefs.

This is not to say that one will never hear an occasional racist joke or comment, or observe a racist confrontation directed against African Americans, or Jews, or Asians, or “Polacks,” or “Hillbillies,” or even Caucasians. People of all races and backgrounds can occasionally be thoughtless and hurtful, and some of them will occasionally say and do racist things which they do not in their hearts believe. When asked how we can end racism, the much-admired actor, Morgan Freeman, in a 60 Minutes interview in 2005, stated simply: “Stop talking about it. I'm going to stop calling you a white man, and I'm going to ask you to stop calling me a black man.”⁵ Truer words were never spoken. However, despite this sound advice and despite all of the evidence that racial discrimination is well behind us, many in our society continue to spread the false narrative that the American people are infected with “systemic and institutional racism.” This narrative is splitting our nation apart.

In a state like South Carolina, which is so rich in history and on which history much of the state's economically-important tourism industry is based, local citizens and visitors alike must confront – and make sense of – the difficult issues of slavery, race and segregation which have absorbed the state during the vast majority of its long history. Most historians of recent decades have focused almost entirely on these issues in their analysis of our history, giving relatively less attention to the many other deserving subjects. These historians broadly condemn those customs and institutions that have suppressed our African American population over the years and applaud those who played key roles in bringing these institutions to an end. The result of this is that these troubling institutions of our past are discredited and those responsible for bringing them to an end are appropriately acknowledged. That much is good.

However, many of these historians also condemn most of those who have led our nation since its first settlement over 400 years ago, focusing only on their roles in perpetuating those institutions. They apply today's standards of morality and concepts of political correctness to people who grew up in an entirely different era, and whose views of the world were molded by personal experiences, conventional wisdom and moral standards far different from those of today. The result is that most of our forebears – including some of our historically most revered “founding fathers” – are now being

⁵ CBS News, 60 Minutes, 2005, Interview by Mike Wallace.

characterized as evil and misguided persons, with little or no acknowledgment that they acted according to the widely accepted standards of their day, and that they made many positive contributions to our world.

These critics fail to acknowledge that the evils of slavery, segregation and the oppression of minorities were not the exclusive property of the white leaders of our American past, but were ancient and widely-embraced institutions for which the entire human race shares blame. Almost every civilization in recorded history – from the ancient Egyptians and Hebrews, to the Greeks and Romans, to the Chinese, to the Arabs, to the Aztecs and Mayans of the New World and even to the pre-Columbian Native Americans here in the Southeast – employed the institution of slavery in one form or another.

The critics also fail to consider that throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, white servitude was in widespread practice. Many of the ancestors of white Americans found their way to the New World as “indentured servants” who were bound as unpaid laborers normally for a period of seven years in exchange for their passage across the ocean. Although these indentured servants were more fortunate than the African slaves who had no realistic hope of being free in the future, it is important to appreciate the fact that white Americans of our past accommodated themselves to African slavery against the background of the general acceptance of indentured white servitude.

The critics also do not consider that the African slave trade was significantly enabled by African tribes enslaving members of other tribes and selling them to Arab, European and American slave traders who transported them to the Arab world and to the Americas. The extent of African involvement in the slave trade is illustrated by the example of King Tegesibu of Dahomey in West Africa who, in the single year of 1750, made approximately £250,000 from selling slaves.⁶ Also, many Africans who were brought to America had already been enslaved in Africa where it has been estimated that three quarters of the population in Sierra Leone was historically non-free.⁷ Further, more than a few free blacks in the South at the time of the Civil War owned slaves themselves.⁸ Even today, slavery – though technically illegal – is still actively practiced in some African countries.⁹ Thus, the evils of slavery are far from being limited to the white population. Slavery is not an American, or a white evil: It is a *human* evil, and all mankind throughout history bears guilt for the atrocities perpetrated under this institution.

It is also undeniable that from the very beginning of European settlement in America, there was a consistent and continuing effort on the part of the white population to institute and maintain a system which would hold its black population in a position of

⁶ Thomas, Hugh, *The Slave Trade, The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870*, Simon & Schuster, 1997, p. 354. Thomas' book, an excellent survey of the Atlantic slave trade, contains a lot of interesting information about the slave trade, much of which is unfamiliar to historians and the general public.

⁷ Littlefield, Daniel C., *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1991, p. 78.

⁸ In South Carolina in 1860, there were 171 black slaveholders of which one, William Ellison of the Sumter District, owned sixty-three slaves. See Edgar, Walter, *South Carolina – A History*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, SC 1998, pp. 308-310.

⁹ “Slavery still haunts Africa, where millions remain captive,” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 2013.

servitude and second-class citizenship. Even the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, was a racist by today's standards.¹⁰

Because of the far greater percentage of the black population in the Southern states, the effort to subjugate the black race was greater here. Beginning with the end of the federal occupation of the South in the 1870's, this effort intensified and by the turn of the twentieth century, a fairly universal system of "segregation," in which blacks were relegated to separate, and generally unequal, accommodations, was in place. Additionally, so-called "Jim Crow" laws were passed to ensure that blacks would be kept in their condition of subservience. At that time, the idea that the color of one's skin was indicative of one's worth was almost universally held, from the far reaches of the British Empire to even in the African American communities in America, where mulattos were considered to be superior to other African Americans.¹¹ Like slavery, this systematic repression of people based upon their skin color was not strictly an American or a white evil: It was a human evil and all mankind bears guilt for this misguided concept.

In condemning our white forebears for slavery and segregation without consideration of the historical context in which the forebears lived, and without acknowledgement of their many positive contributions, modern critics are as guilty of de-humanizing their fellow man as the most strident segregationist was of de-humanizing black citizens of a century ago. *The fact is that, given the same background and faced with the same circumstances, the overwhelming majority of us – black and white, rich and poor, old and young – would have acted just as those leaders did in the times in which they lived.* Ours are not the sins of the *white* race or the *black* race, but rather they are the sins of the *human* race.

One of the most important truths in Christian theology is illustrated when, on Thursday night before the crucifixion just before Christ was arrested, he told Peter that he – Peter – would deny him thrice before the cock crew. Peter refused to believe it, saying "No, Lord, not I," but then he did deny knowing Christ three times during the night as he was questioned, and immediately after the third denial, he heard the cock crow.¹² So, too, we may say that "No, we would never be guilty of that which our forebears did," but, the reality is that the cock may very well crow for us too. As soon as we accept our own personal fallibility and adopt an attitude of moral humility, we will be better able to help our fellowmen overcome any racial prejudices which they may have, and to help our world embrace peace and goodwill among all mankind.

Our objective should be to encourage racial harmony, and, as Morgan Freeman has suggested, the best way to accomplish that is to "stop talking about it." We should not seek to change the names of our buildings or to remove our historical monuments, because such actions will inevitably create more racial divisiveness which will hurt our

¹⁰ Lincoln, Abraham, Fourth Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Charleston, Illinois, September 18, 1858, contained in Baser, Roy P., editor, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume III, pp. 145-146.

¹¹ Edgar, p. 310. See also the "Story of Macedonia Church" by Bettis C. Rainsford, Sr. where discrimination by skin color was rigidly enforced in this African American church in Edgefield in the early 20th century.

¹² *Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Chapter 26, verses 33-35, 69-75; *St. Mark*, Chapter 14, verses 29-31, 66-72; *St. Luke*, Chapter 22, verses 33-34, 56-62; *St. John*, Chapter 13, verses 36-38, Chapter 18, verses 17-18, 25-27. It is significant and instructive that this story appears in all four of the Gospels.

nation and its people. Instead we should seek to honor others whose contributions may have been overlooked and to devote our energies to doing those things which will bring our people together.

We recognize that our Edgefield leaders of the past who you will read about on this website or in our publications were not perfect – even according to the standards of morality of the times in which they lived. Yet, these men and women – white and black – were unique individuals who were born into a world far different from that of the twenty-first century. Their lives, beliefs and characters were formed by the economy, society, and political systems in which they found themselves. They had to play with the hands that they were dealt. If any of us were born into the shoes of any of these historical leaders from our past, we would very likely have acted just as they did. Their struggles were, in most cases, substantial and prolonged. But, in the end, they made major contributions to building our county, our state and our nation. We are proud of their accomplishments and, while we may acknowledge their shortcomings, we celebrate them and stand ready to defend their memories.