

American Racism: Why It Won't Go Away

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America has been working for a long time to get over our racism. Enter presidential candidate Barack Obama. Clearly, we still have a ways to go. Why do we still struggle with racism? The laws changed years ago, so why does progress lag? Why are most churches still so segregated? Why do famous (and not so famous) people continue to use insensitive language? Considering the institutional origins of American racism, it's no surprise we're having a hard time.

America has been working for a long time to get over our racism. Enter presidential candidate Barack Obama. Clearly, we still have a ways to go. Why do we still struggle with racism? The laws changed years ago, so why does progress lag? Why are most churches still so segregated? Why do famous (and not so famous) people continue to use insensitive language? Why do children of color graduate at lower rates than their European American counterparts?

Why haven't we ever actually achieved the "melting pot?" U.S. President John Quincy Adams wrote at the end of the American Revolution, "[Immigrants] must cast off the European skin, never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than backward to their ancestors; they must be sure that whatever their own feelings may be, those of their children will cling to the prejudices of this country."

Melting involved intermarrying and producing "American" children. So the melting pot was for Europeans, and never was intended to include Indians, Mexicans, or Africans. Later, when America did begin to ask people of color to assimilate and melt, many rejected the invitation, choosing instead to nourish a sense of pride in their own heritages.

Imagine in your mind the doctor who invented the blood bank and the process for producing and storing plasma. He was the first director of the Red Cross Blood Bank during World War II, saving thousands of soldiers' lives. He resigned that position in 1942 over the issue of segregation. Not segregation of soldiers or of healthcare workers, but segregation of blood.

The U.S. War Department directed in 1942 that "White" blood should be kept separate from "Black" blood. It had to be labeled that way, of course, because all blood looks red to the human eye. But "White" blood was deemed superior to "Black" blood, and so Dr. Charles Drew, who was African American, resigned his position to become Professor of Surgery at Howard University.

If you imagined the inventor of the blood bank to be White, you would not be alone. Why is that the case? And how did we get to the point in America where we separated

blood based on the skin color of the donor? It was no accident, but instead the logical conclusion of an intentional effort – an effort that requires thorough examination if we are to understand why America still struggles with racism in the 21st century.

Ralph Ellison said, “There are few things in this world as dangerous as sleepwalkers.” If diversity advocates try to fight racism and advocate for diversity without intimately understanding racism, we will further delay the realization of our goal as we miss the mark with our ideas for solutions. In order to work for justice, we need to know about what Alden Vaughan calls the “Roots of American Racism,” and how, as Joseph Barndt has outlined, they are systemic in nature.

Many diversity advocates move from fighting one individual case of race prejudice to the next, and find that it is a task with no end. But looking toward the source of that race prejudice, and looking deeply into the systemic nature of American racism, can provide a more comprehensive solution. This article provides a brief overview of historical racism in American systems and institutions. It is barely a slice of American history.

For the purposes of this article, American racism is defined as the institutionalization throughout the systems of America of the falsehood that the White “race” is superior to all others.

Significantly, America did not invent the concept of hierarchies or even oppression. Probably the first hierarchy was that of gender. Other pre-American hierarchies involving oppression include the caste system of India, which embodies the ascendance of light over dark in religion. Moses was criticized by Aaron but defended by God in Numbers 12 for marrying a Cushite (African) woman. Hippocrates divided the world between Greeks and Barbarians, the Barbarians being the less desirable group. Shakespeare wrote Othello in 1604, a testimonial of oppression against dark skin before racism was entrenched in America. The Great Chain of Being is a classist ordering of everyone, according to the Greeks and later Alexander Pope.

While slavery plays a central role in any discussion of American racism, slavery too has been a world-wide phenomenon. By the time Portugal initiated the Atlantic African Slave Trade in the 1400s, and the Spanish, Dutch and British all took a turn at controlling it, slavery was a well-known institution around the world. When Christopher Columbus, on his first voyage to the Western hemisphere first saw the “Indians,” his immediate thought was to capture them and bring them to Spain as slaves, and that is what he did.

Egyptian, Hebrew, Roman, Greek, Chinese, and many African civilizations accepted slavery at various points in history. The enslaved in these civilizations were mostly prisoners of war, criminals, or the result of a self-sale to pay off a debt. In most slave cultures, slaves controlled at least their names; many were able to marry, hold property, vote, teach, retain their religion and culture, and many bought their freedom. There

were often strict religious guidelines regulating the humane treatment of enslaved people.

Now to America. British and other European immigrants saw the “new” world as an expansive land that could prove highly profitable. However, they faced two obstacles, 1) People already lived on the land they wanted to develop, and 2) there were not enough European people willing to work the land. European indentured servants worked only for a term of years and then were released. When these servants escaped prematurely, they could easily blend into society and were hard to recapture.

The colonists initially thought they could solve both of their problems with one solution: enslave the native residents to work the land. However, this effort proved unsuccessful because those who we now call American Indians quickly died in large numbers in captivity. It was in the British colony of Virginia in 1619 that the first African servants arrived in America. By 1700 in colonies where slavery was legal, slavery was synonymous with African heritage. The British colonists had developed a brand of slavery that the world had not yet known, slavery based on skin color or “race.” The latent beliefs in European superiority and internal prejudices against dark-skinned people were beginning to be institutionalized.

Note two things in the following excerpt from the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705: that the justification for enslaving dark-skinned people is that they are not Christian, and that an abusive master receives complete immunity in advance for killing any slave who exercises his or her (inalienable) right to liberty.

“All servants imported and brought into the Country...who were not Christians in their native Country...shall be accounted and be slaves. All Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves within this dominion...shall be held to be real estate. If any slave resist his master...correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction...the master shall be free of all punishment...as if such accident never happened.”

1705, Virginia Slave Codes

Not only was colonial and later antebellum American slavery unique in its codified connection to skin color, but it was also one of the most extreme slave systems the world had ever seen. Borrowing a page from burgeoning Latin American slavery, Black slaves served for life and their progeny also were lifelong slaves. Enslaved people in America regularly suffered branding, lashing, and chains as methods of discipline.

But perhaps the most significant and lasting damage was the loss of languages, names, religion, and families. The family structure of enslaved Africans in America functioned at the mercy of slave owners, who often sold off husband, wife, and children to different plantations. European American landowners habitually raped women enslaved on their plantations, adding to the destruction of Black family systems.

Truly, many civilizations have reputations of brutality. Indeed, some might observe that American brutality bore a striking resemblance to British brutality, which would be no surprise, since 90% of colonists at the end of the 17th century were of British ancestry. But how did a people who so recently had risked everything crossing an ocean to escape oppression so quickly become oppressors of others? And how did the religion they sought to freely practice so quickly become a means by which to oppress? How did someone as prominent as the governor of South Carolina feel justified in saying the following before the United States Senate?

“We do not think that whites should be slaves either by law or necessity. Our slaves are black, of another and inferior race. The status in which we have placed them is an elevation. They are elevated from the condition in which God first created them, by being made our slaves. None of that race on the whole face of the globe can be compared with the slaves of the South. They are happy, content, unambitious, and utterly incapable, from intellectual weakness, ever to give us any trouble by their aspirations.”
- Henry Hammond, South Carolina Governor 1807-1864

Americans created and developed America through our systems of religion, education, economics, law enforcement, healthcare, media, and others. Institutions are the organizations societies establish in order to implement their systems. For example, every school in our country is an institution implementing our educational system. One of the important things to know about institutions is that they preserve time worn practices even after policies and laws are changed. When we recognize that virtually all American institutions were developed in an environment of pervasive racism, we may begin to see exactly why institutional racism still looms so large today.

The initial problem facing the ambitious colonists was that there were a large number of people who did not agree with the plan to cultivate and “civilize” this land, and they were willing to fight to keep their traditional way of life. Yet fledgling American systems met the challenge, and helped to implement an almost complete genocide of American Indians.

Ninety percent of North American Indians were killed through violence and disease between 1492 and 1900. The U.S. Military not only used typical warfare techniques, but also poisoned blankets with smallpox once they learned that Indian resistance to the deadly disease was extremely low.

L. Frank Baum, author, Wizard of Oz and the editor of The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer in 1891 printed this justification of the military’s actions: “...Our only safety depends upon the total extermination of the Indians. Having wronged them for centuries we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth.”

This is but one example of how the media played on the fears generated when Indians fought to preserve their lives and their way of life. Combined with the religious messages coming from early American pulpits, the seamless message was systemic.

Not only did American colonists develop a racist system in order to secure the land and solve their labor dilemma, but they stoked the fires of racism in order to maintain and develop their positions of power. It can be said that every major system in America lent its support to create a uniquely American racism.

Racism could not have survived, much less thrived the way it did in America if the system of Christian religion had not given its blessing. John Louis O'Sullivan in 1845 declared European-American western expansion divinely ordained, coining the term "Manifest Destiny." This religious doctrine gave God's blessing to the genocide of Indians, African slavery, and American expansion into the Caribbean and Pacific. Yet the idea existed much earlier.

The first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony wrote in 1634, "Through the Lord's special providence... There hath not died about two or three grown persons and about so many children all the last year; it being very rare to hear of any sick of agues or other diseases." But, he noted in passing, as "for the natives, they are near all dead of the smallpox so as the Lord hath cleared out title to what we possess."

An obscure verse in the Bible played a large role in the acceptance of this doctrine. British explorer George Best in 1578 and Reverend Thomas Cooper in 1615 corrupted Noah's curse of his grandson Canaan in Genesis 9:25-27 to justify slavery. The verses read as follows: "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers." He [Noah] also said, "Blessed by the Lord be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave."

Cooper said this "Curse of Ham" meant that because the descendants of Ham were the Africans, they were therefore destined to be slaves. Many, many European American ministers used this ancient religious curse to justify American peccancy.

Yet the curse was not directed at Ham, but one of his sons, Canaan. Ham had four sons, Cush, Mizraim, Phut, and Canaan. Cush is the ancient name for Ethiopia, in Africa. Canaan is in the area we now call Israel, although Abraham is said to have wiped out all of the original Canaanites in a battle in the time of Moses. So even if Noah had the ability to condemn a certain people to slavery forever, it is clear that Canaan (whose descendants were all destroyed) is the only son of Ham mentioned in Noah's curse.

The American religious system also utilized elements of separation and forced acculturation in its implementation of racism. European Americans worked diligently to convey European standards of worship and theology to all peoples living in America, but the drive to preserve cultural aspects of worship has proved too strong. The most

enthusiastic example of diversity in American institutions today is religion, due to the separation of church and state.

Even though religious approval was paramount for racism to thrive in America, slavery and genocide was troubling to the American conscience. Early Americans faced a fundamental schism: they were forming a new country based on the ideals of freedom and justice, and yet they were building this country by unjustly oppressing Africans, Indians, and other non-Whites. How could they justify slavery while fighting for freedom? The solution they found was to produce fraudulent science that characterized the oppressed groups as less than human. Recently, American scientist George Morton was found to have falsified his experiments that showed African brain size to be smaller than European.

The “Enlightenment” provided the classification of species. This scientific ordering of human groups that positioned those of European heritage at the top lent crucial credibility to racist ideology. Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish anthropologist, wrote The System of Nature in 1735. Building on his classifications, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in 1776 developed the classifications many of us remember from grade school, including "Caucasian", "Mongolian", and "Negroid". What we may not remember are the racist characterizations given to each group. The European scientists who created this ordering shamelessly put their own group at the top of the order: Caucasians were characterized as intellectual, adventurous, and civilized while other groups were assigned various weak and negative characteristics.

Historically, the term ‘race’ had been used interchangeably with nationality, but now it took on a more scientific flavor. The term “White race” became seen as a scientific reality that most Americans still accept today. Europeans and European Americans were skilled at using language to obfuscate the truth of what was being done. Ironically, the “Enlightenment” was a time when scientists used false science to help formalize a racist ideology that Americans needed to defend the economic exploitation of the “lesser” races.

Even while racism was the accepted norm, those who stopped to try to examine race became mired in confusion. Originally, the Irish were not considered to be White, but became so after a few generations as they became more a part of the American fabric. Race was so intangible that the U.S. Supreme Court reversed itself numerous times in the early 1900s, attempting to rule on whether groups like Asian Indians and Syrians were White.

Today the Human Genome Project has shown that all human beings are 99.99% alike genetically, proving that systems can be used not only to promote racism but also to fight it. Indeed, the vast majority of anthropologists today now reject the scientific reality of race, calling it a social construct with little relevance to science. The American Anthropological Association, in its Statement on Race, pulls no punches:

"The "racial" worldview was invented to assign some groups to perpetual low status, while others were permitted access to privilege, power, and wealth. The tragedy in the United States has been that the policies and practices stemming from this worldview succeeded all too well in constructing unequal populations among Europeans, Native Americans, and peoples of African descent."

The system of the U.S. Federal Government was one of the most powerful systems to carry out American racism. Even so, most 21st century Americans are unaware of the blatant racism of our early presidents.

[Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and T. Roosevelt all aired racist beliefs publicly.](#) But the federal government did much more than talk. Congressional immigration restrictions such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, U.S., 1882 and the 1906 Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan were explicitly racist. The Dawes Act of 1887 anglicized Indian names and resulted in huge losses of Indian lands. During WWII, Congress acted to intern Japanese Americans born in the U.S. based on the fear that they were a threat to American security.

The system of American courts furthered implemented the racism of the federal government. In *People v. Hall*, 1854, a California court ruled that Chinese people were not allowed to testify against Whites, thus shielding Whites from prosecution of atrocities against Chinese. The Supreme Court decision of *Dred Scott* in 1857 said that an enslaved person is not a citizen but property, and thus cannot bring an action to court. In the *Botiller v. Dominguez* decision of 1889, European Americans who appropriated Mexican land were cleared of any wrongdoing. The infamous "separate but equal" falsehood got its definition and blessing from the Supreme Court in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896. *Plessy* is also the decision that enumerated the One-drop rule: if a person has one drop of African blood, s/he is considered African. This rule was beneficial to slave owners who, by fathering children by their female slaves, could produce a continuous supply of new slaves.

The American economic and labor system was at the foundation of racism in America. Southern plantations experienced the huge demand for labor that spurred the impetus for slavery. Asian immigrants and others worked for almost nothing building the transcontinental railroad and in factories and farms. Due to low expenses, these enterprises flourished, making owners wealthy enough to afford large political contributions to politicians who supported the status quo. Generations of laborers suffered dreadful conditions building the American infrastructure while European American fortunes grew larger and larger.

The American educational system was central in the transmission and entrenchment of racism. The bias toward White and European history and culture is so pervasive that many Americans of European background today do not see themselves as having a

culture – it’s just the way things are done. American heroes were almost exclusively those of European heritage, thus explaining why Americans would imagine a White man when reading about a renowned surgeon who invented the blood bank. Still today unsettled is the question of how Columbus could have “discovered” America when there were millions of people already living there. Recent changes to textbooks that reflect a more accurate portrayal of American history and a more diverse group of American heroes have met with significant protest from groups of conservative European Americans.

As an enslaved youth, the brilliant abolitionist Frederick Douglass overheard his master say that if a slave “learns to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave.” Douglass became intent on learning because he realized that slave-masters prevented slaves from learning in order to keep false stereotypes of white superiority in place, brainwashing many slaves into believing in their inferiority. In order to advocate for diversity, the insidious trap of internalized oppression, one of the most damaging and lasting legacies of racism in America, must be fully understood.

American Indian children received a thorough Anglicization at American boarding schools. Like Mexicans in America, they were punished for speaking their native languages, and were given European names, religion, and worldview. When Blacks were allowed to attend school after the end of slavery, schools were segregated and both Blacks and Mexican-Americans were relegated to the oldest facilities and used materials.

While schools were transmitting the racism message to American children, the American media transmitted a similar message to their parents. It might be surprising to learn that many if not most American race riots were White-initiated and media fueled. Over 1000 people are estimated to have died in the New York City Draft Riots of 1863 (portrayed in the movie *The Gangs of New York*).

White race riots occurred in Atlanta, New Orleans, Chicago, Cincinnati, Toledo, New Albany, St. Louis, Detroit, Napa Valley, and Fresno, among other cities. Tulsa Whites killed 75 people and destroyed a thriving Black business district during the 1921 race riot there. The 1943 Los Angeles Zoot suit riots lasted for seven days because each day the local newspaper printed information about where White servicemen could find the Mexican American youth who were their targets. Most Americans have never heard of these riots. The 20th century American media, when discussing race riots, has focused on the explosions of pent up frustration over institutional racism in cities like Detroit and Watts in the 1960s.

The American media historically has been, and for the most part still is today, run by White editors and reporters who interview White experts, thus producing one-sided portrayals of people of color. The groups that are portrayed as most violent by the

American media have actually perpetrated the least amount of violence in America. The importance of the media's power to redefine reality cannot be overestimated.

Because law enforcement carries the power to spontaneously remove freedom, it has been a key system in the implementation of American racism. The earliest American law enforcement was established to protect landowners, or White men. The end of slavery saw the rise of Jim Crow and the "Black Codes," a set of laws that punished homeless former slaves for vagrancy by returning them to work the very plantations they had recently left. Law enforcement officers carried out these arrests throughout the South.

Racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan found a steady supply of members as well as leadership from the ranks of law enforcement. Under the guise of infiltration, the FBI rebuilt a faltering southern Klan. Members of law enforcement are implicated in many of the 4,700 documented lynchings between 1882 and 1964. A racist gathering of law enforcement officers called the "Good O' Boys Roundup," founded by an ATF agent, survived until 1995 in Tennessee.

Until the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles in 1992, perhaps the most well known incident of official oppression was Birmingham Police Chief Bull Connor's leadership in the turning of police dogs and fire hoses on civil rights protesters in the 1960s. In 1973, A Dallas police officer shot and killed 12 year-old Santos Rodriguez, handcuffed in the back of his police cruiser, while questioning him about a burglary.

Racist incidents involving law enforcement have continued to occur up to the present day. A New York City police officer abused Haitian immigrant Abner Louima in 1997. The age-old practice of racial profiling is now receiving national attention after having been the subject of a lawsuit in New Jersey. Nearly half of American state legislatures have passed or are considering racial profiling legislation.

Other systems that helped to fully implement racism in American society include housing, zoning and insurance systems that redlined Blacks and Hispanics to less desirable parts of town, a political system that promoted and elected blatantly racist candidates who blamed the victims of racism for their position in society, a healthcare system that denied people of color service, practiced segregation, and still today conducts its studies mostly of European-Americans, and a system of arts and literature that mirrored and reinforced a racist American society. While there were exceptions in every system, for example some employers paid a living wage to their employees, American systems and their institutions were the tool used to implement racism across the country.

All of these various systems came together to implement and sustain American culture. The result? Picture the "All American Girl." Do you imagine someone who looks more like Anna Kournikova or Serena Williams? Although America is one of the most diverse

countries in the world, our racist systems have conspired to give us an image of a person of European heritage whenever the term “American” is used.

Another cultural aspect is the language of black and white. Why did American colonists begin calling themselves White during the 16th century? Clearly no European American’s skin is actually white. A quick review of dictionary entries for “white” include many positive meanings: innocence, purity, cleanliness. “Black,” on the other hand, carries denotations of evil, death, and disaster.

Furthermore, the colors black and white are polar opposites. What better way to entrench the idea of European superiority and African inferiority than to weave the ideology into the American language, using words the people already understood and used? While the 1960s “Black is Beautiful” movement and James Brown, through his song, “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud,” helped shift America’s understanding of the word “black,” the older underlying connotations survive today.

The systemic institutionalization of racism in America was a powerful force affecting the lives and thinking of every American. And at the same time, there were many, many brave people in America who resisted the poison. Violent racism was met with violent resistance from brilliant leaders including Tecumseh, Crazy Horse, Geronimo, Nat Turner, and John Brown. Organizational resistance was even more successful. Abolitionists Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison and groups like the NAACP, LULAC, JAAC, SCLC, AIM, and labor unions made significant changes to American culture. When the country needed strong leadership, people like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X rose to the challenge.

The NAACP’s case, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, was a turning point in our country’s history because it finally revealed the “Separate but Equal” doctrine as not only disingenuous but unconstitutional. Scientific and sociological writings, including *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth*, *The Fallacy of Race* (Ashley Montagu, 1942), *The Kerner Commission Report* of 1968 and *The Mismeasure of Man* (Steven Jay Gould, 1981) also brought to light what had been going on in America. We have these often-forgotten heroes to thank for the progress America has made toward the elimination of racism.

And there is still so much more to be done. Many of the gains—desegregation of public places, voting rights, anti-discrimination laws—are now taken for granted by the younger generations. And yet the very system which fomented American racism – the economic system – today presents significant inequities between European Americans and Americans of color. In 1968, the income of the typical Black family was 60 percent that of European Americans. As of 1997, the percentage had increased one percent to 61%. The disparity is similar in Latino American and American Indian communities. And those economic gaps affect so many important aspects of American life: education, housing, employment, mental and physical health, and on and on.

This article has only briefly touched on the way in which every American system's institutions implemented a pervasive racism throughout our country, and how leading Americans of European heritage planned and implemented this strategy.

Though this information may provoke anger, there is another disturbing question to ponder: What would I be willing to give up to change our history? Perhaps the richness of our country and the high standard of living we enjoy today would not be ours if the people who built it had been paid a living wage.

While this article traces racism back to European American leadership during the formation of our country, the message is not intended to be that Americans of European heritage are bad people, but that racism runs deep within the history, systems, and institutions of the USA. The many efforts to combat racism and change the laws have not fully eliminated the racist practices of these institutions. Realizing this truth, one might begin to despair that things will never change.

However, the current efforts in Iraq to eliminate all traces of Saddam Hussein could provide insight into how we might approach eliminating racism from American systems. Public images of his regime have been removed. An international commission including Unicef is working in Iraq to comb through educational materials looking for any "bathist" elements and replacing them with more balanced information. They are also retraining all teachers who were trained in the pervasive bathist ideology.

These are the kind of efforts American institutions require (but have never undergone) in order to rid our country of the racism albatross that we still today carry around our collective neck. Until we undertake this elaborate purging, we will continue to suffer with the racist legacy our American forefathers left to us. It will be a costly but cost-effective endeavor, and will require the participation of all of America's diversity advocates.

Many of the references for this article can be found at <http://www.wordsmooth.com/racism.html>