

History Matters

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***Abstract:** This essay surveys the degree to which racism has been a dominant theme – indeed, often the single most important theme – of all American history. It shaped the Constitution, dominated Congressional and judicial controversies during the first six decades of the 19th century, and then continued to shape the country’s politics, economy, and social structure all the way through the present. This essay also emphasizes the degree to which black resistance of racism was a constant, taking on different forms depending on the politics and culture of the times, but always present. It discusses the emergence of the modern civil rights movement in the years after World War II, but argues that, notwithstanding the legislative and judicial gains made as a result of that movement, racism remains a central and structural reality in America to this day, most notably visible in the mass incarceration of blacks, and the economic and social inequalities that continue to be pervasive in contemporary America.*

***Keywords:** race, class, civil rights movement, sit-ins, mass incarceration, SNCC, black protest*

As a country, the United States has constantly celebrated its exceptionalism, calling itself “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Americans have seen themselves as different, better, and more pure than other nations. While other countries are contaminated by corruption and self-interest, Americans, by contrast, tend to identify with the idealism embodied in the values of the Declaration of Independence.

Yet too often, this insistence on focusing on the ideal has gone hand in hand with not acknowledging the country’s troubled history – the degree to which fundamental flaws have resulted in levels of inequality that fly in the face of the Declaration’s pledge that “all men are created equal, endowed

by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

This insistence on American purity keeps Americans from remembering – and internalizing – the way that barriers of race, class, and gender have historically fractured the American Dream. Americans insist on believing that they have solved their problems – citing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Woman Suffrage Amendment, or the Ledbetter Equal Pay Act, all as evidence of how the country has addressed problems of discrimination. Once these corrective measures were enacted, there was no need – theoretically – to fixate on issues of discrimination. The country had now taken care of *those issues*.

Yet by taking this approach, Americans, consciously, or subconsciously, have been kept from recognizing the degree to which patterns of inequality not only remain, but may even have gotten worse.

Take the historic pattern of how race and class have interacted as themes throughout American history. Slavery, for example, only became a legalized institution in the 1660s and 1670s. Why then? Because whites who were poor or indentured servants threatened an economic uprising against the rich. How to deal with that? In response, upper class whites insisted that race was the primary source of division in the society. Hence all whites shared a pivotal quality in common. They were distinct from blacks who were now legally enslaved. Racial divisions would reign supreme, obscuring – even suppressing – differences between whites over wealth and status.

For a brief period after the Civil War, bi-racial governments in southern states implemented another agenda, focusing on the wellbeing of the community as a whole. States passed public education laws for the first time, constructed roads and canals for the benefit of the entire population, even initiated public facilities to care for the mentally ill. When the Ku Klux Klan sought to destroy bi-racial cooperation through massive violence against blacks, the federal government intervened to suppress the KKK’s reactionary behavior. But then came the election of 1876, and the Republican Party – the supposed saviors of black America – chose to abandon the former Confederacy in return for the agreement of three Southern states to cast their electoral votes for Rutherford B. Hayes, the Republican candidate for president. Bi-racial democracy had come to an end – at least for the moment.¹

1 See C. Van Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); C. Van Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Eric

But the dream did not die. The Readjuster Movement in Virginia tried to resurrect it in the 1870s, passing legislation that benefited both whites and blacks, advancing education for all, and, for at least a few years, putting the good of the whole ahead of the interests of the few. Then came the Populist movements of the 1880s and 1890s. Based on an alliance between the all-white Southern Farmers Alliance and the Colored Farmers Alliance, a new bi-racial coalition developed that sought far-reaching federal intervention to help poor farmers and sharecroppers. The Populists elected bi-racial governments in numerous states. They proposed a Federal sub-treasury plan that would subsidize farmers (much like today's agricultural subsidies); greater commitment to public education; and support for extension of infrastructure, including roads and canals.

Their bi-racial class alliance threatened the wealthy so much that elite white Democrats in the South once more – as in the 1660s and 1670s – raised the banner of racial solidarity. Black men were out to rape white women, the white elite declared. Black voters were the source of corruption. The only way to purify government was to eliminate the black franchise. So, from 1890 in Mississippi to 1901 in North Carolina, white-led constitutional conventions passed myriad measures to take the vote away from black men. These included grandfather clauses (you could not vote if your grandfather had not voted, thereby taking the ballot from former slaves and their offspring), literacy tests (you had to read parts of the constitution and interpret them before a white registrar who would judge whether you had “passed;”), and poll taxes. In most southern states, the number of black men who could vote declined from 80 percent to 5 percent or lower. Soon, the same measures led to the disenfranchisement of poor whites as well. This was also the period in which Jim Crow laws – creating segregation by race in all public facilities – became universal in the South.²

The banner of white solidarity had unfolded in the 1890s as it had in the 1660s and 1670s to suppress any possibility of democracy from below, with poor whites and poor blacks finding common ground in their class status. But once more, the fight against elite white rule continued. During the Great Migration of the 1910s and 1920s, millions of blacks left the South and moved North. Those who stayed in the South devoted themselves to build-

Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-77* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988); David Blight, *Race and Reunion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

2 Van Woodward, *Origins*.

ing their own community institutions – better schools, even if segregated – stronger churches, and vibrant mutual help associations.

During the New Deal – with the crucial help of Eleanor Roosevelt and the “Black Cabinet” she helped to bring to federal government positions – some progress was made toward more equal distribution of federal relief funds and job opportunities. Programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA) helped promote black job opportunities. Black civil rights organizations grew, mainly the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) and the National Negro Congress, as did some progressive white political groups like the Southern Conference on Human Welfare.

Then came the critical catalyst for more far-reaching change – World War II. Seizing the opportunity to move forward, A. Phillip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened a march on Washington in 1941 unless the president issued an executive order that blacks could apply for wartime factory jobs alongside whites. Fearful of what a 50,000-person black march on Washington might do to his wartime mobilization plans, Franklin Delano Roosevelt – with the strong endorsement of Eleanor – issued the Fair Employment Practices Committee executive order shortly thereafter.³

The war against the racism of Nazi Germany cried out for an equally powerful war against racism at home. Black soldiers volunteered for the armed services in greater percentages than whites. Soon, black newspapers took up the cry for a “Double V Victory – Victory at Home as well as Victory Abroad.” Racial protests exploded. The NAACP grew from 50,000 members in 1940 to 500,000 in 1945. Discrimination persisted unabated in the South – black soldiers were segregated and treated poorly. While in Birmingham, black recruits were denied service at a white restaurant while German prisoners of war sat inside eating with white American soldiers. But when blacks went to California, Hawaii, England and France, they suddenly found themselves being treated more often as equals. Their dual experience – horrible treatment in the South, much better treatment elsewhere – redoubled their determination to demand equality under the law when they returned home.

3 William E. Leuchtenburg, *FDR and the New Deal, 1932-40* (New York: Harper Collins, 1963); Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: The Defining Years*, (New York: Random House, 1999); Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: The War Years and After, 1939-1962* (New York: Random House, 2016); Harvard Sitkoff, *The New Deal and Blacks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

In the meantime, racial tensions exploded in Northern cities like Detroit and New York where blacks had moved to fill wartime jobs. Whites responded with physical assaults when blacks tried to swim in lakes where in the past only whites had gone in the water. While the race riots reflected the abiding strength of white racism, they also highlighted the need for governments – state and national – to take corrective action. The fact that blacks who migrated to the north could also now cast ballots made urban politicians particularly attentive to the need for change.⁴

Thus, when the war ended, it was no surprise that black racial protests escalated immediately. Medgar Evers came back to Mississippi wearing his uniform and immediately went to register to vote. Hundreds of other returning soldiers did the same. When they were denied, they organized. Race riots broke out in places like Columbia, Tennessee. Even President Harry Truman had to take notice. “I had no idea things were this bad,” he said. But then in 1947 he appointed a presidential commission on civil rights packed with firm supporters of greater racial equality. Under their prodding he ordered that the armed forces desegregate – though they did not do so until the Korean War in 1950. But so strong was the black political presence in the north, that at the 1948 Democratic national convention, the delegates passed a *strong* civil rights platform – over the objection of President Truman. He then endorsed the platform, and became the first president ever to address the national convention of the NAACP. In the end, it was the mobilization of black votes in New York, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and California that re-elected Harry Truman president. It was a small margin – and it would not have happened except for those black votes in Northern states and the civil rights plank of the Democratic Party.⁵

In the meantime, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall, persistently pushed for elimination of segregation in the nation’s public schools. Working with incredibly courageous local

4 Michael V. Cooper, *The Double V Campaign: African Americans and World War II* (New York: Lodestar Books, 1998); Harvard Sitkoff, *Toward Freedom Land: The Long Struggle for Racial Equality in America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010); Harvard Sitkoff, “The Detroit Race Riot of 1943,” *Michigan History*, LII (Fall 1984); William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 8th edition, 2015).

5 Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risk* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002); David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*.

blacks who placed their lives on the line to challenge white school systems in court, Marshall demonstrated in case after case that black children were robbed of an education equal to that of whites. One victory came after another until the NAACP decided, in a huge gamble, to make segregation itself – not just unequal resources for black children – the issue before the courts. Finally, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that segregation in schools was unconstitutional. More than half a century after Jim Crow became the law of the South, the country had made a pivotal move toward greater racial equality.

But in this instance, as in so many others before and after the Brown decision, a national commitment to change did not mean that racial equality would come any closer. President Dwight D. Eisenhower never endorsed the Brown decision. A person with his moral authority and political popularity – the “hero” of World War II – could have embraced desegregation and ordered that all schools would start to desegregate the next year. Instead, he equivocated, telling some people that appointing Earl Warren as Chief Justice had been the worst decision of his life. (Warren wrote the Brown decision and was single handedly responsible for mobilizing a unanimous vote). Many states in the South were ready to accept – reluctantly – the Brown decision if Ike had rallied behind it. Instead, by his silence, Eisenhower created a vacuum that invited resistance. Only when Arkansas’ Governor Orval Faubus engaged in outright rejection of the president and courts in 1957 by refusing to desegregate the public schools of Little Rock did Eisenhower respond and send in federal troops. But it was in retaliation for Faubus’s insubordination toward his commanding officer that Eisenhower acted, not from any commitment to racial equality.⁶

It was precisely because so little *real* progress had occurred – even after the Truman civil rights commission and the Brown decision – that the civil rights movement embraced direct action protest. While much of America saw the onset of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 as a *spontaneous eruption of anger* at the arrest of Rosa Parks, an esteemed community member, for refusing to give up her seat to a white bus rider, the boycott had, in fact, been long in the planning, and based on a decade-old history of grass roots community organizing. Rosa Parks was not an accidental figure who happened to be in

6 Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2004); David A. Nichols. *A Matter of Justice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017); Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*.

a given place at a given time. Rather, she had been mobilizing black citizens around civil rights issues for nearly fifteen years. It was Parks who journeyed south from Montgomery to rally black citizens in a rural Alabama town to demand that six white policemen be put on trial for raping a black woman. She was the long-time secretary of the Montgomery NAACP. There, she worked closely with E.D. Nixon, the head of the local chapter of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and with Jo Ann Robinson, the head of the Women's Political Council, a black counterpart to the whites-only League of Women Voters. *Most important*, she had recently attended a retreat at the Highlander Center, a legendary advocate of social justice protest in Tennessee, where she deliberated with her colleagues on the most effective means of civil rights protest. Two previous women had been arrested for not giving up their seats on a segregated bus. But one had an arrest record, and the other was a pregnant teenager who was not married. Neither provided the ideal "victim" around whom to mobilize a community protest. Rosa Parks was that ideal person.

The degree to which the Rosa Parks arrest was no accident could be seen in the immediate aftermath. Parks went directly to see Virginia and Clifford Durr, New Deal liberals with deep connections to the larger progressive community. She then called E.D. Nixon of the Sleeping Car Porters Union who quickly started to mobilize his members. Finally, she reached out to Jo Ann Robinson from the Women's Political Council. That very night, Robinson and her colleagues met at Albany State College where they mimeographed 40,000 posters advertising a bus boycott and encouraging blacks in Montgomery to rally behind Parks. By the time the community met at the Hope St. church the next night to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. preach about the meaning of non-violent resistance, the movement was already in place, mobilized by Parks, Nixon, and Robinson. It was hardly surprising, then, that the next morning, 99.9 percent of Montgomery's black community boycotted the city's bus lines – an action that would continue for 381 days. Martin Luther King, Jr. soon became identified nationally as the leader of the movement. A more realistic assessment was that Parks and her allies created the movement, and that the movement then created King.⁷

Soon that movement shifted from *boycotting* city buses – essentially a passive act, using non-participation as a form of protest – to *sitting in* at lunch counters and restaurants, an active demand, physically declaring by one's

7 Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance* (New York: Random House, 2010).

presence at a lunch counter the right to equal service. The response was electric. In Greensboro, North Carolina, where the 1960s sit ins began, four students sat at the lunch counter demanding equal service the first day. The next day there were 23, then 66, then 100, and finally, on day five, 1,000 blacks took over downtown. The sit-ins spread like wildfire. Within eight weeks, similar student protests had erupted in 54 cities in 9 different states.

In early April, two months after the sit-ins began, Ella Baker – viewed by most as the “mother” of the movement – convened a meeting of student protest leaders at Shaw University in Raleigh, Baker’s alma mater and a leading all-black university. Baker had been a field secretary for the NAACP, and during the 1940s had traveled thousands of miles in the South organizing local chapters of the black protest organization. Baker was now the acting executive secretary of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a civil rights organization led by black ministers that had emerged from the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Some wanted the sit-in movement to become a youthful appendage of SCLC. Baker disagreed. In her view, the students needed their own voice, their own organization, their own agenda, and their own tactics. With her encouragement, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) emerged from the Shaw conference. From that point forward, it became the cutting edge of the civil rights struggle.⁸

SNCC was organically different than SCLC. The minister’s organization was hierarchical, featuring top-down leadership, with King and his executive committee defining the agenda, always working through the black clergy. By contrast, SNCC was non-hierarchical, based on bottom-up grass roots activism that originated in a thousand different communities. One of the earliest SNCC volunteers was a young math teacher named Robert Moses. His philosophy, expressed repeatedly to local communities, was “the people will lead, the leaders will follow.” SNCC entered towns in Mississippi that screamed of extreme racism. Working with older local veterans like Amzie Moore and Fannie Lou Hamer, SNCC’s young volunteers – subsisting on a \$10 a week allowance – organized voter registration campaigns. The local black residents who went to City Hall to register were almost always turned away. Frequently they encountered brutal violence

8 William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

– from both police and local vigilantes. Hundreds were arrested. But the movement would not stop. SNCC volunteers grew more vigorous the more resistance they encountered.

Before long, news of civil rights demonstrations became a daily feature of national newspapers and network TV news broadcasts. Despite tensions between SCLC and SNCC, the groups also worked together on some occasions. After SCLC suffered a significant defeat in Albany, Georgia, in 1962, King decided to frontally assault the bastion of segregation, Birmingham, Alabama. That campaign seemed likely to fail as well. But then black women and children took to the streets. When they challenged police lines, dogs and fire hoses were unleashed against them. That night, and for nights thereafter, network TV, featured teenagers, children, and their mothers being blasted against cement walls by overpowering fire hoses, then attacked by vicious dogs. It was enough to outrage even conservative white suburbanites in the North.

Soon, John F. Kennedy responded as well. Initially, Kennedy had proceeded cautiously on civil rights (his brother Robert, the Attorney General, was more aggressive). But after police in Birmingham brutally suppressed civil rights demonstrations in the spring of 1963, Kennedy spoke out. In a nationally televised speech, he came down on the side of racial equality. Reciting the statistics of black infant mortality, and the denial of educational and health opportunities for blacks, the President asked his fellow citizens, “Who among us would choose to be born a Negro [in this world]?” The time had finally come to act, to do the right thing. That night Kennedy announced his support for a Civil Rights Act that would desegregate all public accommodations, end economic discrimination against blacks, and establish a permanent commission on civil rights. It was the beginning of a critical summer of challenge. Two months later, on August 28, 1963, the March on Washington took place, with over a quarter million Americans, whites as well as blacks, filling the National Mall between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. Leaders of every major civil rights group spoke, Peter, Paul and Mary sang, and Martin Luther King, Jr. galvanized the audience as well as millions watching on television with his “I Have a Dream” speech.⁹

Still, it became increasingly clear that the obstacles to change were as great as they ever had been, and perhaps even greater in places like Mississippi where black civil rights workers were systematically killed, beaten,

9 Carson, *In Struggle*; Nick Bryant, *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

and harassed. For the most part, neither the national press nor the government took notice. Bob Moses and others increasingly pondered ways that more national attention could be focused on Mississippi. Allard Lowenstein a white liberal reformer, had brought white Stanford students to Mississippi in the fall of 1963 to help mobilize a black "Freedom Vote" that would demonstrate how many black citizens wanted the right to vote. Lowenstein's visit raised the issue of what might happen if white volunteers were invited to join black SNCC workers in the summer of 1964. If white students from elite Northern colleges were victims of violence alongside of blacks, surely the government – and the media – would have to pay attention. SNCC staff were divided over the idea, but ultimately it was decided that 1,000 Northern volunteers, overwhelmingly white, should come to Freedom Summer in Mississippi in 1964 to join with black activists in creating Freedom Schools, mobilizing the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to go to the Atlantic City Democratic National Convention in August, and to challenge head-on white racist hegemony.

The wisdom – and tragedy – of Freedom Summer exploded into national headlines just one week after the first training session for white volunteers began at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. One afternoon, three SNCC workers – James Chaney, a Mississippi black, and Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner, two New York whites – were arrested in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Later that night, they were released. That same night the three men disappeared. Two months later their bodies, brutally tortured, were recovered from an abandoned quarry near Philadelphia.

The tragedy confirmed Bob Moses' instinct. Once white people became victims, as well as blacks, the federal government would respond. Immediately, FBI agents flooded the state. Freedom Summer had generated what it had always sought – federal law enforcement officials helping to protect civil right workers. In the meantime, the national media zeroed in on what was transpiring in the state. But at a horrific cost.

Not surprisingly, the federal presence barely tempered the brutality of white racists in Mississippi – and elsewhere. Freedom Schools were a stunning success. So too were the food relief and assistance programs that SNCC workers created. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party canvassed the state, signing up supporters and building a powerful case for seating MFDP delegates at the national Democratic convention in Atlantic City instead of the segregationist white Democrats, who had already pledged their support to Republican Barry Goldwater. The MFDP case was overwhelming.

But Lyndon Johnson then made one of the worst mistakes of his career. He was so intent on making this *his* convention, and his alone, that he would not abide anyone deflecting attention from him. So, he had MFDP headquarters bugged, and told delegates on the credential committees that they, or their spouses, would lose government jobs if they voted for the MFDP. Instead of embracing a just cause and solidifying his ties to civil rights activists, Johnson alienated his natural base, giving them cause for wondering why they should ever believe white liberals when they pledged support of civil rights. Disillusioned and feeling betrayed, some of SNCC's leaders went off to Africa. Meanwhile, back in Mississippi, the seeds of Black Power grew.¹⁰

But the struggle continued. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 represented the first dramatic victory in August. Attention then turned to the most fundamental issue of citizenship – the right to vote. It was good to have the right to eat a hamburger at a restaurant, or stay at a Holiday Inn. But it was even more important to be able to vote for candidates who would enact legislation to alleviate poverty, enhance education, and promote health care. The fight for voting rights galvanized the country in February and March 1965, when supporters of SNCC and SCLC sought to march from Selma to Montgomery to demand the ballot. On their first attempt to walk across the Pettis St. Bridge in Selma, civil rights protestors were brutally beaten, attacked by club-wielding police on horseback and vicious dogs. With the whole country mobilized, the march finally took place two weeks later, culminating in Martin Luther King, Jr's riveting address from the State House steps in Montgomery, "How Long, Not Long." The violence continued. Viola Liuzzo, a white woman driving movement veterans back to Selma, was murdered by a man in a pursuing car. With him in that vehicle was an undercover FBI agent. Still the movement would not stop, and four months later, Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act of 1965, telling Congress in his speech of endorsement that "we shall overcome."

Significant progress occurred in many areas in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Desegregation in housing led to tens of thousands of African Americans moving to

10 Carson, *In Struggle*; Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1991).

the suburbs. Affirmative action opened countless new, higher-paying jobs to blacks. The civil rights bills, in combination with massive new federal aid to higher education, led to an explosion in black college enrollments. By 1975, there had been a 500 percent increase in the number of African Americans graduating from college. This, in turn, helped increase the growing number of blacks entering the middle-class. In a state like Mississippi, scores of black citizens were elected to public office, and by the 1990s, the state boasted more black Mayors and City Council members than any other state in America.

Yet the bottom half of the black population received almost none of these benefits. Unemployment for that segment of the population remained twice that of white people. High school dropout rates continued at more than 50 percent. Poverty decreased briefly, but then rose again, so that by the end of the century, approximately 25 percent of all black Americans fell below the poverty line. There were now two black Americas, one where the chance for advancement had increased significantly as a result of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, the other where conditions stayed the same as they had been, or worsened.¹¹

During most of the 1970s and 1980s, little progress occurred for the less well-off portion of the black population. The dominant political voices of those decades were Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Nixon had invented the “Southern strategy” for Republicans. He opposed busing for school desegregation, ranted against affirmative action, and explicitly appealed to old Southern politicians like South Carolina’s Strom Thurmond to change parties and become Republicans. The result was that whites in Southern states overwhelmingly shifted to the Republican Party, while blacks moved from the party of emancipation – the Republicans – to the party that initiated the civil rights laws of the 1960s, the Democrats. When Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, he started his campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi – the place where Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman were seized – and throughout his two terms in office contended that the race problem in America had been solved. No longer did inequality based on race exist in this country.

Some improvement came in the 1990s with the election of Bill Clinton as president. Always supportive of blacks, Clinton boasted of his record on civil rights, and the African American novelist Toni Morrison went so far as

11 Carson, *In Struggle*; Hogan, *Many Minds*; Barbara Coombs, *From Selma to Montgomery: The Long March to Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2013).

to call Clinton the country's "first black president." In a booming economy – under Clinton the country added 22 million new jobs – blacks did better than they had in the 1980s. But the overall poverty rate in the black community did not fall; nor did the number of high school dropouts in America's urban ghettos decline.

Under George W. Bush, the situation only got worse. Rates of economic inequality increased. The trend had started at the end of the 1970s. After World War II, the middle-class had continued to grow steadily, with the distance between the rich and the middle-class remaining relatively stable. Then in the 1980s, a major reversal took place. In 1979, the top 1 percent of all income earners in the United States took home 9 percent of the national income. But by the time George W. Bush left office, the top 1 percent took home 33 percent of the national income. The middle class was shrinking, the gap between the rich and everyone else was growing.¹²

Then came the Great Recession of 2007-2008. Everything started to fall apart. The stock market crashed, factories closed, and banks were in their worst condition since the late 1920s. But no one suffered worse than those blacks who had recently entered the middle class. Foreclosure rates on black mortgages skyrocketed. Savings accounts plummeted. Confidence eroded.

To many people, the election of Barack Obama as the first African American ever to hold the highest office in the land signaled the ultimate triumph of the civil rights struggle. To be fair, Obama's success did represent an extraordinary achievement. The son of an African father and a white American mother, Obama had charted a dramatic road to political success. A brilliant scholar, he soon became a community organizer in Chicago, learning the lessons of listening to the poor and the powerless. He then took his dream of a new kind of politics to the American people, persuading an enthusiastic majority that he represented a different kind of American leader, dedicated to realizing the country's highest ideals.

But what Obama's election obscured was the degree to which racism remained alive and pervasive in America. Yes, it had been newly disguised as a problem of class – black people were simply poorer than others. But those who ran the country insisted that being poor had nothing to do with racism. Indeed, the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court wrote – in a 5 to 4 decision – that America had put racism behind it. Hence, the

12 William Chafe, *Hillary and Bill: The Politics of the Personal* (Durham: Duke University Press, Reprint edition, 2013).

key provision of the Voting rights Act of 1965, imposing special restrictions on states with the most vivid history of black voter disenfranchisement, was no longer needed, since the situation that had prompted enactment of that section of the law no longer existed. No official act spoke more powerfully to the degree to which important white leaders in the nation had put blinders on to prevent people from seeing the degree to which race remained a central contradiction to the ideal of equal opportunity.¹³

By 2015, those blinders had started to come off. Indeed, events ripped them off. A black man named Trayvon Martin was killed in a Florida suburb by a white man who perceived Martin as a threatening presence in the neighborhood where both men lived. The white man was acquitted. Michael Brown, a young black man in Ferguson, Missouri, was chased down by police and shot to death as he raised his hands in the air. Eric Garner, a Staten Island man who sold goods illegally on the street was choked by police, yelling “I can’t breathe,” and then proceeded to die. No police officials were convicted of a crime. None were even put on trial.

Suddenly, the screeching reality of persistent racism could no longer be ignored. Belatedly – but with increasing frequency – people began to read about the “prison-industrial complex,” the spread of mass incarceration among young black people doomed to spend much of the rest of their lives in prison.

The statistics on the mass imprisonment of young African Americans from 1980 to 2010 were staggering. First of all, the overall prison population skyrocketed, increasing more than 400 percent – from 500,000 in 1980 to 2.3 million in 2008. America led the world in the number of its citizens who were in jail. The United States had six times as many people imprisoned – as a portion of their population – as Australia; eight times more than Germany, ten times more than Sweden, and twenty-five times as many as India. While citizens of the United States comprise only 5 percent of the world’s population, they represent 25 percent of the world’s prisoners. The amount of money government agencies spent on this imprisonment skyrocketed also – nearly 800 percent – from 6.7 billion in 1985 to \$52 billion in 2013.

But the incarceration figures represented just the tip of the iceberg. It turns out that a huge percentage of the increase in numbers of those imprisoned came from people arrested for drug offenses. The number of people

13 See *Shelby Co. v. Holder*, June 25, 2013; *New York Times*, June 25, 2013.

in jail for arrests related to drugs exploded from 41,000 in 1980 to nearly 500,000 in 2013 – more than a tenfold increase. Even more telling, nearly 80 percent of all drug-related arrests had to do with *possession only* – no use of guns, no crime or violence.

The real secret of the mass incarceration epidemic, however, was the degree to which, as Michelle Alexander has recently written, it became a modern-day version of Jim Crow – with the arrest figures, allegedly having nothing to do with race, in fact serving as the vehicle for infusing racism into a whole segment of American society.

The figures on drug-related offenses are stunning. Although surveys show that blacks use drugs at approximately the same rate as whites, black men were 5 ½ times more likely to be incarcerated than white men. Most of the imprisoned were arrested for using crack cocaine – a less expensive form of cocaine more likely to be found in poor neighborhoods than in affluent suburbs. Although blacks comprise only 12-13 percent of the population, they comprise 59 percent of those in state prisons for drug offenses. The situation is even worse in federal prisons. There, in 2002, blacks made up 80 percent of those convicted under federal law – this despite the fact that two-thirds of crack cocaine users in the United States were white or Hispanic. Although whites constitute 78 percent of the overall population, they comprise just 35 percent of all prisoners. Blacks, by contrast make up 13 percent of the population but 38 percent of all prisoners. Even though five times as many whites use drugs as blacks, African Americans are sent to prison for drug use at ten times the rate of whites. And they receive longer jail sentences. Blacks serve as much time for a drug offense (58.7 months) as do whites for a violent crime (61.7 months).¹⁴

It does not stop there. In many states, a person convicted of a felony automatically is disenfranchised. In light of the statistics cited above, this inevitably exacts a greater toll on blacks than on whites. Indeed, blacks are three times more likely to be disenfranchised for time served in jail than whites. More than 13 percent of African American men are denied the right to vote because of a prior felony conviction. Of even greater concern, this population of the disenfranchised is more concentrated in southern states like Louisiana, Florida, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas than in northern states like Maine, Massachusetts and Minnesota.

14 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

The story could go on and on. Racial profiling is everywhere. Black students at elite universities are stopped and questioned by police multiple times. Blacks and Hispanics who are “pulled over” for a possible traffic violation are three times more likely to be searched by police than whites, and four times more likely to be subjected to a form of physical intimidation.

Perhaps most disturbing – and most confirming of the degree to which racism remains a central dimension of our society – the right of African Americans to vote is now under renewed and vicious attack. Within six weeks after Justice Roberts invalidated the key enforcement provision of the 1965 Voting rights Act, several southern states acted to limit, curtail, and make more difficult the right of blacks and Hispanics to cast ballots. In North Carolina, the state legislature reduced early voting, limited same day registration, and passed a voter ID law requiring a form of state photographic identification for a person to be able to cast a ballot. The voter ID most likely to be used for that purpose is a state driver’s license. But 600,000 blacks and Hispanics in North Carolina do not have driver’s licenses. Moreover, getting to a Department of Motor Vehicle location for an average citizen working a 40-hour week is not easy to arrange. While states like Oregon enact universal suffrage laws, encouraging every citizen to vote, other states do all that they can to limit voting, and to make casting a ballot most difficult for minorities. Perhaps the most outrageous recent example is that of Alabama. First it passed a law requiring each Voter to show a state-certified photo ID. Then, it shut down all driver’s license offices in *every county in the state that was more than 75 percent black*.¹⁵

History does matter. Americans have been good at reminding other nations of that. They encourage Germany never to forget the Holocaust and insist that Japan remember who started World War II.

But when it comes to its own past, Americans persist in glorifying the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, yet refuse to acknowledge the persistence in everyday life of the racism that continues to betray those ideals. Especially since the 1960s, Americans have looked the other way, convinced that the civil rights legislation enacted in that decade solved once and for all the presence of racial injustice in society. If nothing else, the “new Jim Crow” of mass incarceration, and the powerful evidence of racist violence in Ferguson, Charleston, Cleveland, Chicago and throughout the

15 *New York Times*, May 15, 2017; *Washington Post*, May 29, 2017; *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2016.

country, has hopefully established, once and for all, how wrong it is to ignore the original sin of America's history. Blindness is no longer an option. Seeing the truth of American history, from beginning to end, represents the only chance for America to become the kind of nation it claims to be.

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