On Race

One of the most useful and effective weapons used by oligarchs, autocrats, and capitalists against the forces of democracy is the concept of race*. It's not always easy to divide and conquer unionists or community organizers by trying to identify and separate by religion or political ideology or other not-so-evident distinctions; but physical features, that's a natural wedge.

Prejudice is learned. It is taught. It is universal in this world. As newsman Edward R. Murrow famously wrote, "Everyone is a prisoner of his own experiences. No one can eliminate prejudices—just recognize them." And that seems to be at least a good start to tackling the problem: recognition. Along with acknowledgement and acceptance.

When Presidential candidate Nikki Haley was asked, "Is America a racist country?", she refused to accept the idea that it might be the case, saying, "We've never been a racist country." And this: "…the founding fathers had the best of intentions when they started, and we fixed it along the way." Let's set aside the fact that she was a national candidate for high office and probably was attempting to quickly calculate in her head whether answering in the negative or the affirmative would gain or lose more votes. It seems proper to first ask what is meant by a racist country. Or how might we define "racist"? Or maybe it would be fairer to pose the question differently, such as: "Do you think racism has played a significant part in the formation of this country?"

Let me ask you this question: When you first started reading this essay about race, what group or groups came to mind? Chinese? Filipino? Mexican? Pakistani? Inuit? Perhaps. Or maybe not. Did it occur to you that your answer may have something to do with your own race or ethnicity? I would guess, if you are white, the people of color you would most likely associate with the word *race* used in this context are dark skinned and as a group identified as "Black." But that may be my own prejudices speaking. Let's get back to examining the accuracy of Ms. Haley's comments.

When our Founding Fathers patched together an agreement to form a government, in order to get those oligarchic-minded southern planters to come along they allowed that enslaved persons would count as three-fifths of a person. These were mostly Africans brought here or born here in bondage. This was hardly the beginning, but merely a chapter in this country's long history of using race as a weapon in the furtherance of prosperity. Fears associated with national security have also played a part in our historic treatment of racial or ethnic groups, such as the internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. To learn more about the treatment of minority groups, whether by race, ethnicity, religion or gender by capitalist interests —often aided and abetted by our own government—you are encouraged to read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. (This book is available free on-line in PDF format or at better libraries.)

For the greater part of this country's existence, those of white European origin have been the dominant shapers of this country, for better or worse; at least that is what American history

books tell us. This narrow perspective is in large part because white Americans were able to write their history and subordinate nearly any other racial, ethnic or cultural perspective; and so they were able to teach what frequently amounted to white supremacy. [For more on this, see *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity* (2023) by Donald Yacovone.] Only been in recent years have historians started to expose to an uninformed public some of the less-than-noble behaviors attributable to the generations of America's past. Should today's white Americans be ashamed of themselves for the sins of their forefathers? In my opinion, no. But neither should they ignore or dismiss those events, or repress or prohibit the teaching or introduction of other perspectives, as has recently been attempted in some cases.

It would be easy to place blame on others for what has happened in this country since before its founding, if we agree that racism, so-called, might be considered part of our human nature. But we are not blameless if we have perpetuated what came before. There was a term—now since retired—called the "white man's burden." It was a term used in the late 19th century and popularized by a Rudyard Kipling poem. It represents imperialism as the moral burden of the white race, who are divinely destined to "civilize" the brutish, non-white "others" who inhabit the barbarous parts of the world, but its message could easily be applied to any vulnerable minority population. Kipling was, at the time exhorting the United States to assume colonial control of the Philippine Islands, a brutal episode in American history, an action that prompted a scathing satire by Mark Twain in his essay: *To the Person Sitting in Darkness*.

The so-called white man's burden was a spurious argument that rationalized the exploitation of the indigenous populations of countries by powerful military and economic forces. The true burden—for all of us—for the family of man, is one faced by all those who support democracy and the belief in words borrowed from English philosopher John Locke, set down by our Founding Fathers, and which I have amended, that: "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [and women, regardless of color or ethnicity] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*.

Prejudice, whether racial, religious, or sexist, exists and will always exist. We will experience it in our lives and we would do well to recognize it in ourselves, to teach about it, explain it, accept its existence while still resisting it, and to the extent we are able to, when we recognize it in others, call it out. Nicely.

Richard Waterman

For further reading: *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson

* For this essay, I have used these definitions: "Race refers to the concept of dividing people into groups on the basis of various sets of physical characteristics and the process of ascribing social meaning to those groups. Ethnicity describes the culture of people in a given geographic region, including their language, heritage, religion and customs."
(Washington University in St. Louis)