

## ***HISTORY OF RACE IN AMERICA***

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## **Racial Bias in America: How did we get here and why are we stuck?**

### **Presentation by Jeffery Robinson (2017)**

It should be clear at the beginning that I have my own views on the topic of race in America – some of which will come through loudly and clearly in these pages and during the presentation at the seminar. My purpose, in this document and at the seminar, is to try to present factual information that will stimulate thought, conversation, and consideration of how race impacts us in our everyday lives and in the criminal justice system.

I am 60 years old, born in 1956 in Memphis, Tennessee. There is a picture on the cover of Time Magazine from May 11, 2015 (see <http://time.com/vault/year/2015/>), which speaks volumes to me because 1968 and 2015 have special meaning for me. In 2015, I joined the ACLU as a deputy legal director after 34 years as a criminal defense lawyer. I made the move because my fears about race and its impact on policing and the criminal justice system made me afraid. I was afraid for my community, family, friends, and, yes, as a Black man in America, I was afraid for myself. I had not been this afraid since...1968.

I was 11 during the spring and summer of 1968 – not a man, but old enough to know enough. My parents were educators (Mom a teacher and Dad a high school principal) and they were active in the civil rights movement, supporting the striking sanitation workers. They talked to me about what was happening, what was at stake, and where not to go to stay alive. I remember the tanks and teargas, the rifles with bayonets, and the signs carried by the sanitation workers.



In 1968, I was afraid about race and its impact on policing and the criminal justice system. I was afraid for my community, family, friends, and, yes, as a Black pre-teen, I was afraid for myself. Almost 50 years after King was assassinated in my hometown, it seems we are in a flash back – Yogi Berra would say “It’s like déjà vu all over again.” Race is still one of the hottest, most divisive topics in our country. The Attorney General nominee has made numerous “race based” statements, including organizations like the NAACP “force civil rights down the throats of white people.” One of the leading advisors of President Trump said that President Obama, the nation’s top Black leader, should die of a horrible (mad cow) disease and that Mrs. Obama should “return to being a male and [be] let loose in the outback of Zimbabwe where she lives comfortably in a cave with Maxie, the gorilla.”

Back in 1968, J. Edgar Hoover said that King was the most dangerous domestic threat in America and used “dirty tricks” to try to get King to commit suicide. Many southern law enforcement officers referred to him as Martin Luther Coon. 1968 and 2016 sound way too similar.

Racism in America is older than the formation of the United States. I have attended talks and spoken on panels about race in America where the title started with the words like “After Ferguson...” as if police use of violence and deadly force against people of color is something discovered in 2014. The only thing new is the use of cell phone and other video technology to record what has been happening for the entire history of the United States.

As you read this paper and consider the presentation at the seminar, I ask you to do several things:

- Start out with the view that someone who disagrees with you is not a KKK card carrying racist on the one hand or a knee-jerk liberal who falsely blames everything on race on the other hand.
- Be willing to look in the mirror with the same objective scrutiny that you believe you use when evaluating other people – don’t accept excuses for questionable behavior on your own part.
- Consider that everyone in America has some racism and racist views that can be attributed to the culture and society we all grew up in.
- Finally, ask yourself if you are willing to get uncomfortable enough to engage in a real discussion about the impact of race on justice in America.



**Let's shake hands with each other and ourselves and think seriously about race in America.**

### **WHAT DOES RACISM LOOK LIKE?**

One way to start thinking about the question posed above is to look at what the criminal law has tried to do regarding race. What we see is that explicit, conscious, intentional bias is the target of the criminal justice system.

**Jury Selection** – *Batson* prohibits intentional, purposeful racial discrimination in jury selection.

**4th Amendment** – *Whren* explains “*We of course agree...* that the Constitution prohibits selective enforcement of the law based on considerations such as race” and “[s]ubjective intentions play no role in ordinary, probable-cause Fourth Amendment analysis.” Emphasis added.

**Death Penalty** – *McClesky* prohibits intentional, purposeful discrimination in use of the death penalty.

These attempts to deal with racism show a superficial approach – as long as you don't explicitly say that race is a factor, you can use race as a factor to administer justice. For example, all prosecutors know how to challenge a juror with a facially neutral reason – and because judges don't want to call a prosecutor racist, nor do defense lawyers, we have dealt with our guilt about allowing race to play a role in justice by playing a word game. If you can say a reason that is not based on race, we will allow the challenge even if it is totally based on race – just don't say it!

### **CAN GOOD PEOPLE BE RACISTS?**

The comedian Jon Stewart said this about racism:

*The overwhelming condemnation makes it clear we have made enormous progress in teaching everyone that racism is bad. Where we seem to have dropped the ball... is in teaching people what racism actually is ... which allows people to say incredibly racist things while insisting they would never be racists.*

In modern America, we talk about racism as if it occurs only in those who are uniquely villainous or morally deformed. It is the ideology of “hillbillies and rednecks” – a belief system held by the uneducated and mean spirited among us. Well, not so fast. We still have plenty of the old “KKK card carrying racism” alive and well in America. Consider some of the emails

found on the City system in Ferguson, Missouri, during the DOJ investigation there. They included the following:

- An email stated that President Barack Obama would not be President for very long because “what black man holds a steady job for four years”
- An email that mocked African Americans through speech and familiar stereotypes, using a story involving child support. One line from the email read: “I be so glad that dis be my last child support payment! Month after month, year after year, all dose payments!”
- An email that depicted President Barack Obama as a chimpanzee.
- An email that stated: “An African-American woman in New Orleans was admitted into the hospital for pregnancy termination. Two weeks later she received a check for \$5,000. She phoned the hospital to ask who it was from. The hospital said, ‘Crimestoppers.’”
- An email that described a man seeking to obtain “welfare” for his dogs because they are “mixed in color, unemployed, lazy, can’t speak English and have no frigging clue who their Daddies are.”
- An email that included a photo of a bare-chested group of dancing women, apparently in Africa, with the caption, “Michelle Obama’s High School Reunion.”

These statements are de-humanizing, hateful, and ignorant. They are racist statements and most people (but not all – like the incoming President’s advisor) would not try to defend the statements as not racist. Still, I wonder how the people who wrote the emails think of themselves. I bet the words “but, I am not a racist” have been spoken by many of the email writers.

We are quick to exonerate ourselves when it comes to claims of racism because we are so sure we are not racists. We believe this even when we are clearly and unmistakably being racist. In 1957, people in Levittown, Pennsylvania, uniting under the flag of segregation, wrote: “*As moral, religious and law-abiding citizens, we feel that we are unprejudiced and undiscriminating in our wish to keep our community a closed community.*” They looked in the mirror and saw upstanding Americans believing in American values – and they were right. The same values were expressed in the treatment of the natives who were here when Europeans arrived, the Blacks during slavery, and later the Latino and Asians immigrants. The base of white supremacy at the core of their actions was invisible to them – it was just the way things were meant to be. It was sometimes known as the “White Man’s Burden.”

Racial stereotyping is ubiquitous and the challenge has expanded beyond concern about twisted white supremacists and now includes something infinitely more subtle and complex: People

who believe in equality but who act in ways that perpetuate bias and inequality. Research over the last 30 years suggests that the problem must now include Americans who intellectually believe in racial equality, who deplore discrimination, yet who harbor unconscious attitudes that result in discriminatory policies and behavior.

For example, scholars have found that blacks and Hispanics treated by doctors for a broken leg received pain medication significantly less often than white patients with the same injury. Do you really think skin color is a factor in feeling physical pain?

One finding is that we unconsciously associate “American” with “white.” Thus, in 2008, some California college students – many who were supporting Barack Obama for president – unconsciously treated Obama as more foreign than Tony Blair, the former British Prime Minister. Likewise, Americans may be factually aware that Lucy Liu is an American actress and Kate Winslet is British, but the tests indicated that Americans considered Liu as more foreign than Winslet.



These attitudes have consequences. The actor Forrest Whitaker was physically assaulted by an upscale deli employee in NYC after entering the deli and leaving without buying anything. Tanehisi Coates, a senior editor at The Atlantic, wrote the following about the incident:

*The idea that racism lives in the heart of particularly evil individuals, as opposed to the heart of a democratic society, is reinforcing to anyone who might, from time to time, find their tongue sprinting ahead of their discretion. We can forgive Whitaker's assailant. Much harder to forgive is all that makes Whitaker stand out in the first place.*

*But much worse, it haunts black people with a kind of invisible violence that is given full force only when the victim happens to be an Oscar winner. The promise of America is that those who play by the rules, who observe the norms of the “middle class,” will be treated as such. But this injunction is only half-enforced when it comes to black people, in large part because we were never meant to be part of the American story. Forest Whitaker fits that bill, and he was addressed as such.*

*I am trying to imagine a white president forced to show his papers at a national news conference; I am trying to imagine a prominent white Harvard professor arrested for breaking into his own home; I am trying to see Sean Penn or Nicolas Cage being frisked at an upscale deli like Forrest Whitaker was...*

*The other day I walked past this particular deli. I believe its owners to be good people. I felt ashamed at withholding business for something far beyond the merchant’s reach. I mentioned this to my wife. My wife is not like me. When she was 6, a little white boy called her cousin a nigger, and it has been war ever since. “What if they did that to your son?” she asked. And right then I knew that I was tired of good people, that I had had all the good people I could take. “*

## **UNCONSCIOUS BIAS**

***Implicit or unconscious*** bias based on stereotypes about race is different from ***explicit*** or deliberate bias in several ways:

First, these biases are unconscious – they are automatic and require no cognitive effort on the part of a person acting on this kind of bias. If I scratch my arm, my brain activates to tell me to scratch. Unconscious bias occurs beneath the conscious level so we are not aware of it happening. Most of us would be horrified if we were aware of these biases and consciously, we would repudiate these biases even though we may hold them unconsciously. And, this type of bias is present in the overwhelming majority of Americans.

Evidence for these unconscious attitudes toward race come from implicit association tests, a window into how our unconscious minds work. You can take them online at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.htm>.

Implicit Bias influences people in all walks of life and in all professions. It has been demonstrated in doctors, nurses (*e.g.*, Van Ryn & Saha, 2011); lawyers, prosecutors, and judges (*e.g.*, Levinson & Young, 2010 and Smith & Levinson, 2012); school teachers (Van den Bergh, *et al.*, 2010); and, yes, even capital defense lawyers (Theodore Eisenberg & Sheri Lynn Johnson, *Implicit Racial Attitudes of Death Penalty Lawyers*, 53 DEPAUL L. REV. 1539, 1545–55 (2004)). This is not a white or Black problem – it is an American problem.

While there is a difference between unconscious bias and conscious bias, actions and spoken words based on either have the same impact and result. And it is people of color who have to live with the consequences. If you get tired of hearing about it, think how tiring it must be to live with it.

Many people say that if unconscious bias is their problem, they can't be held accountable for it because they are not aware of it. This won't work. Once you become aware of the concept, you have a responsibility to examine your behavior and actions to look for the influence of unconscious bias. You can't walk around with blinders on and equate that to a morally defensible set of behaviors. Simply put, once you are aware, do something about it.

### **WHAT DOES TERRORISM HAVE TO DO WITH THIS TOPIC? OR, A BRIEF HISTORY OF RACE IN AMERICA.**



I represented a young man connected to the Earth Liberation Front (“ELF”) who was convicted of setting fires in furtherance of protecting the environment. This loosely connected group set numerous fires and no one was ever injured because they were so careful. They wanted to destroy lumber companies and research facilities, not hurt people. At sentencing, the United States Attorney compared the actions of ELF to the KKK. This argument was an example of the failure to understand and admit the reign of terror experienced by Black and brown Americans since the birth of the nation.

Submitted for your consideration are some pertinent facts, figures and dates:

### **CREATING WEALTH THROUGH SLAVERY, 1619-1865\***

Here is the thing about slavery – it is definitely not your fault AND it is definitely part of our shared history.

African Americans recognize symbols that linger from the inhumane era of slavery and the humiliating days of segregation. How many of us have taken the time to sit down with our children and help them understand that Black American experience? It certainly is not taught in schools.



When my community describes distrust of police, when we are skeptical of investigations involving police shootings of other Blacks, and worry about the potential for partiality in police prosecutions, too many whites look at us and say, “come on, it’s not on purpose...”

Would it make a difference if more white Americans knew that the U.S. Supreme Court once stated that Black people are “beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Although civil rights laws have been passed to reverse this and other anti-black Supreme Court decisions, such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896, the ocean of racial disparities that appear to be permanent social realities are indications to many that the dominant American belief system of black inferiority has not changed at all.

One commentator wrote “I am not asking you as a white person to see yourself as an enslaver. I’m asking you as an American to see all of the freedoms that you enjoy and see how they are rooted in things that the country you belong to condoned or actively participated in the past.”

Let’s consider slavery and the aftermath of that institution.

- America had 246 years of legal slavery. At the time of the Civil War, close to 4 million African Americans were enslaved – 13% of the population of America.
- 40 of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence owned other people.
- One of the main reasons Native Americans were driven off their ancestral land in the Deep South in the 1830s was to make way for vast cotton plantations.
- In 1840, cotton from slave labor = 59% of U.S. Exports. Cotton production rose from 1.5 million pounds in 1790 to 2.25 billion pounds in 1859. (Historian Eric Hobsbawm)
- In 1860, more millionaires per capita in Mississippi Valley (Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana) than anywhere else in America. Historian David Blight has written that in 1860 there were 4 million slaves worth more than *3 billion in 1860 dollars. This investment in “Human Property” exceeded investment in all of America’s banks, factories and railroads combined.*

It wasn’t just the South that got in on the action. Rhode Island shipping tycoons outfitted more than 1,000 slave ships for the trip to West Africa, while New York bankers insured the ships and Massachusetts distillers imported molasses from Caribbean plantations. And of course, English textile manufacturers turned Alabama cotton into cloth. Slavery made America one of the richest nations in the world. The southern plantation owners did not have the capital to produce cotton on such a grand scale without free labor. Slaves provided it.

Then the war ended.

President Andrew Johnson overturned General Sherman’s promise of land for slaves – no 40 acres and a mule, which would have granted 400,000 acres of land to newly freed black families. In a speech shortly before his death, Martin Luther King spoke of the failure to keep Sherman’s

promise, saying “*At the very same time the government refused to give the Negro any land, through an act of Congress the government gave away millions of acres of land in the west and mid-west to white farmers...not only that, they also built land grant colleges with government money to teach the white farmers to farm, not only that, they hired county agents to give them more expertise, not only that, they gave low interest loans so they could mechanize their farms...*”

The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments abolished slavery (except for people convicted of a crime), provided equal protection under the law, and granted Black men the right to vote.

From 1868-1877, there was a brief period of reconstruction, but federal troops left their posts in the south in 1877. Emancipation ran smack into white resentment that the good old days of black subjugation were over.

Legislatures throughout the South scrambled to re-establish white supremacy and restore the aura of legitimacy that the anti-slavery campaign had tarnished. Lawmakers in several states created the Black Codes, which effectively criminalized blackness, sanctioned forced labor, and undermined every tenet of democracy.

Defeated Confederates regrouped as the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia. They regained control of their workforce not by owning them but through terror and violence.

Voter suppression was also a favored tool of oppression. For example, in Louisiana, the number of registered Black voters plummeted from 130,334 in 1896 to 5,320 in 1898.

All over the south, Blacks were arrested for offenses like vagrancy, and then forced to work on the very plantations where they had been slaves. While money was paid for their work, it went to the cities that jailed them, not the workers. They were, in effect, slaves again.

This type of slavery, which was, as far as the Black man and woman were concerned, the exact same kind of slavery they had suffered from before the Civil War, was actually practiced until 1941.

Between 1868 and 1966, there were over 5,000 documented lynchings of Blacks in America. No one knows how high the true number goes. But the documented lynchings amounted to, on average, one lynching a week for 100 years.

Plessy’s 1896 “separate but equal” was an *advancement* in equality and was the law of the U.S. until 1954 – almost 90 years after the Civil War.

Systemic violence against our communities has been a hallmark of Black existence throughout American history. As you consider the following events, ask yourself whether you ever heard of them before – whether you were ever taught them in school – and if not, why not?

The worst riot in American history, the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 destroyed people, property, hopes, and dreams. Hundreds of people died or were injured. Property damage ran into the millions. This riot involved whites attacking a prosperous black community and burning it to the ground.

**EAST ST LOUIS MASSACRE 1917**  
**200-700 Deaths**

**ARKANSAS MASSACRE 1919**  
**854 Deaths**

**TULSA MASSACRE 1921**  
**300-3000 Deaths**

**ROSEWOOD MASSACRE 1923**  
**150 Deaths**

Several things come to mind here. First, the next time you are thinking that slavery is ancient history, think again. Next, all the billions and billions of dollars made directly and indirectly from slavery did not disappear. It went from generation to generation, providing homes, education, and a start in business... all the things that made the “American Dream” attainable. Combine that with the economic suppression of Blacks through vagrancy laws, black codes, and violence and you come upon a staggering set of numbers – in 1865 the best estimate was that Blacks owned .5% of all the wealth in America – not surprising. In 1990, the figure was 1%.

Did you know that social security originally excluded agricultural workers and domestic workers? It may sound race neutral, but here was the result: In 1935, 27% of whites were ineligible of social security, 65% of Blacks were ineligible, and 70-80% of Blacks in the South were ineligible.

Consider a study on employment from 2003 – a study that had first been done almost 40 years ago – by Bertrand & Mullainathan entitled “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination.” Nat’l Bur. Of Econ. Res. Working Paper No. 9873, 2003. The 2003 study showed the same thing as the earlier study and is a prime example of white privilege and some combination of conscious and unconscious bias. The set up and results were as follows:

- The study took 1,300 employment ads in sales, administrative support, clerical, and customer service job categories in Chicago and in Boston and 5,000 resumes were submitted in two categories – “average” qualifications and “higher” qualifications (a little more experience, fewer holes in employment history...). The names varied – there were “white” names like as Emily Walsh or Greg Baker versus “Black” names like Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones.

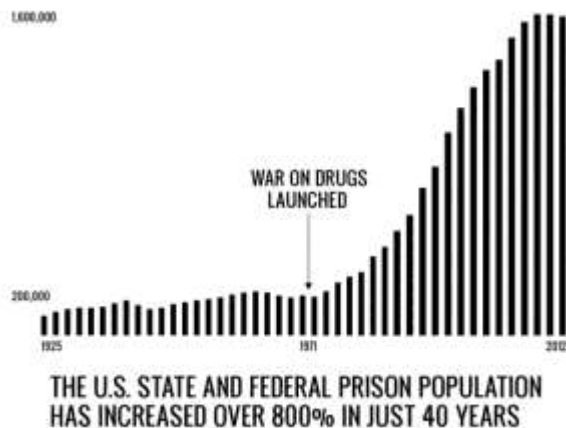
- “White” candidates received 50% more callbacks than “Black” candidates.
- Lower-skilled “White” candidates got many more callbacks than higher skilled “Black” candidates.
- High-skilled “Black” candidates received same callbacks as lower-skilled “Black” candidates.

For those who rely on the narrative that all it takes to get a good job is hard work and stick-to-it drive, this study raises very different implications.

### **AND WHAT ABOUT THE WAR ON DRUGS?**

- About 14 million Whites and 2.6 million African Americans report using an illicit drug.
- 5 times as many Whites are using drugs as African Americans, yet African Americans are sent to prison for drug offenses at 10 times the rate of Whites.
- African Americans represent 12% of the total population of drug users, but 38% of those arrested for drug offenses, and 59% of those in state prison for a drug offense.
- African Americans serve virtually as much time in prison for a drug offense (58.7 months) as whites do for a violent offense (61.7 months). (Sentencing Project)

We all know what happened to the prison population after Nixon’s war on drugs and Clinton’s crime bill:



So, please consider this timeline:

- **At least 246 years (322 years) of slavery – 1619-1865 (1941)**

- >100 years of Jim Crow laws – 1865-1967
- 58 years of Supreme Court embrace of separate but equal – 1896-1954
- 43 years of the war on drugs – 1971 - present

This is the picture of America as lived by of people of color.

## WHITE PRIVILEGE

This is a touchy subject because many white people believe that to admit the existence of this privilege somehow means that they did not work hard to succeed. The fact is that white privilege is not something you ask for, it is put upon white people whether they want it or not. Here are some things to consider about the existence of white privilege:

White Privilege is being able to talk about racism without appearing self-serving.

White Privilege is being able to ignore the consequences of race

White Privilege is being able to fight racism one day, then ignore it the next.

White Privilege is being able to say that you are colorblind because the world does not require you to be aware of your color..

White Privilege is the ability ignore the fact that Hip-hop culture is no more dysfunctional than Wall Street culture. The caricatured imagery of drugs, money and women are headlined most prominently by Wall Street, politicians and media moguls but this never comes to reflect on white people.

Black on black crime does not exist. There are countless white people committing crimes against white people but "white on white crime" is strangely absent from the rhetoric reporting everything from elementary school shootings to world wars. Why should crimes committed by and against people of color be labeled any differently?

**May 17, 1954**



*"Separate but equal is rooted in the deep desire to keep the people who were formerly slaves as near to that state as is possible."*

Thurgood Marshall arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown vs the Board of Education*.

Nearly 90 years after the Civil War, *Brown v. Board of Education* seemed like another moment of triumph – with the ruling on the unconstitutionality of separate public schools for Black and white students affirming our rights as citizens. But Black children ran directly into white rage. Bricks and mobs at school doors were only the most obvious signs. In March 1956, 101 members of Congress issued the Southern Manifesto, declaring war on the *Brown* decision. Governors in Virginia, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, and elsewhere then launched “massive resistance.” They created a legal doctrine, interposition, that supposedly nullified any federal law or court decision with which a state disagreed. They passed legislation to withhold public funding from any school that abided by *Brown*. They shut down public school systems and used tax dollars to ensure that whites could continue their education at racially exclusive private academies. No one was going to force civil rights down the throats of these whites.

Today, America’s schools are more segregated than ever. The quality of public education for children of color is dismal, and the resulting impact on a chance for a successful future is shameful. The promise of *Brown vs. the Board* has failed to materialize. And what about other gains for civil rights in the 60s like the voting rights act? One commentator offers the following analysis:

*When we look back on what happened in Ferguson, Mo., during the summer of 2014, it will be easy to think of it as yet one more episode of black rage ignited by yet another police killing of an unarmed African American male.*

*But that has it precisely backward. What we’ve actually seen is the latest outbreak of white rage. Sure, it is cloaked in the niceties of law and order, but it is rage nonetheless. Protests and looting naturally capture attention. **But the real rage smolders in meetings where officials redraw precincts and pass “voter ID” laws to dilute African American voting strength. It goes virtually unnoticed, however, because white rage doesn’t have to take to the streets and face rubber bullets to be heard. Instead, white rage carries an aura of respectability and has access to the courts, police, legislatures and governors.***

*It’s more subtle — less overtly racist — than in 1865 or even 1954. It’s a remake of the Southern Strategy, Now, under the guise of protecting the sanctity of the ballot box, things like photo ID requirements — to block African Americans’ access to the polls — why only pop up after voting rights act struck down*

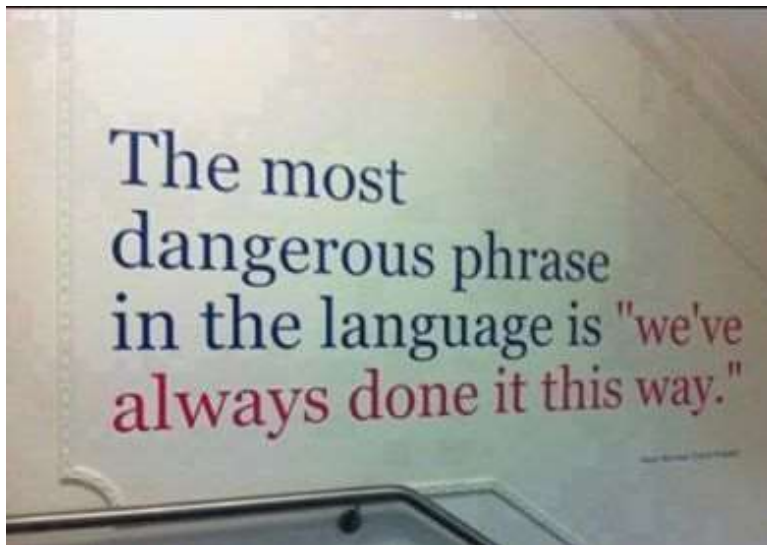
*A joint report by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund emphasized that the ID requirements would adversely affect more than 6 million African American voters. (Twenty-five percent of black Americans lack a government-issued photo ID, the report noted, compared with only 8 percent of white Americans.) The Supreme Court sanctioned this discrimination in Shelby County*

*v. Holder, which gutted the Voting Rights Act and opened the door to 21st-century versions of 19th-century literacy tests and poll taxes.*

*So when you think of Ferguson, don't just think of black resentment at a criminal justice system that allows a white police officer to put six bullets into an unarmed black teen. Consider the economic dislocation of black America. And think of a recent [study](#) by Stanford University psychology researchers concluding that, when white people were told that black Americans are incarcerated in numbers far beyond their proportion of the population, "they reported being more afraid of crime and more likely to support the kinds of punitive policies that exacerbate the racial disparities," such as three-strikes or stop-and-frisk laws. Only then does Ferguson make sense. It's about white rage."*

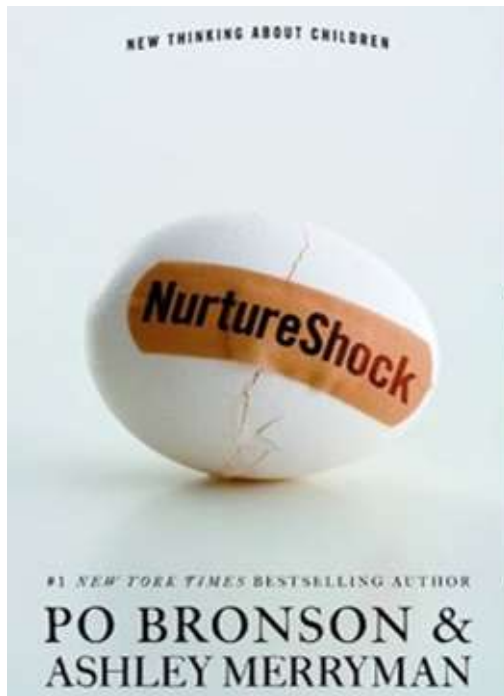
We need to examine our motives more intently and reconcile the moral debt and economic damage inflicted upon generations of Black Americans. If it were you and yours who had suffered this history, would you be satisfied with a color blind, "we are all equal now so get over it" message from your country?

Look at it from this perspective:



### **THINKING ABOUT IT AND DOING IT DIFFERENTLY**

We all have a responsibility to question our assumptions and behaviors – in our personal and professional lives. Race certainly impacts us and our clients in the professional realm, but the personal realm is just as important. I will end this paper with some reflections from the work of Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, who studied families with children for multiple years to study interactions about race:



For decades we assumed children only see race when society points it out to them. Children see racial differences as much as they see the difference between pink and blue.

Babies as young as 6 months old judge others based on skin color.

You need to start the conversations when they are about 3 yrs old.

When they say babies judge others based on skin color at 6 months, they are not talking about racial discrimination – they mean kids can see the differences in how people look and they are curious. If we don't fill in information about these differences, our world will. Here are some helpful insights from *Nurture Shock*:

**1. Recognize that children experience race and that they need help to understand and contextualize it.**

Make a conscious effort to observe the racial messages that surround us (in advertising, in television, on the radio, in books) and recognize that our kids are subject to these same messages. The difference is that they don't have much context to frame those messages. So it's our job to teach them.

**2. Make a conscious effort to share books, movies, and other media with your children that present diverse viewpoints and story lines.**

It isn't enough to say that all people are equal – kids often respond “what does that mean? Remember, children believe what they *see* more than they believe what they hear.

One of the families studied by Bronson and Merryman reported this exchange – “*My daughter recently asked me why so many athletes were Black. She was surprised to learn that there are far more Black lawyers, doctors, and teachers than sports stars.*”

**3. Take advantage of every opportunity to talk about race in America.**



Another family reported this:

*I made my daughter cry this morning. No, I didn't poke her with a stick. We were just talking, and I told her some of the history they aren't teaching at school. The conversation started innocently enough.*

*"Mom, did you know that before the first Thanksgiving, the Native Americans and the Colonists hated each other?"*

*"Well, I think they feared each other, but that often grows into hate. Yeah."*

*She was silent then and I realized that she thought what many of us thought at that age: that Thanksgiving was the Disney-style happy ending to the founding of America. Everyone came together, shared food, and we all lived happily ever after. The end.*

*As a Historian and social justice advocate, that image didn't sit well with me.*

*"Do you know what happened after the first Thanksgiving?"*

*"No, what?"*

*"Everyone went back to fearing each other and fighting. Since the colonists had guns and new diseases and other weapons, they used those to kill and enslave the Native Americans and take their land."*

*I looked up and saw that my daughter was crying...*

*We've had similar conversations about the Civil War, the Civil Rights Act, Women's Suffrage, same-sex marriage, and other "happy endings" throughout American History that were really just beginnings.*

#### **4. Address your privilege and the ways you benefit from institutionalized racism, but also the ways it can allow you to challenge the system.**

After this conversation about Native American oppression, my daughter said this: *"I wish I wasn't White. Then I wouldn't have to feel guilty about everything we've done."*

*I felt what she was saying – and I suddenly understood why so many of my White friends were scared of having these conversations with their children.*

*We all have a racial identity and a racial history. For people of color, that history comes with the heavy burden of oppression. **My racial history comes loaded with privilege – but with privilege, as with power, comes great responsibility.***

*"I hear what you're saying, but I want you to think about that. Because you are White, you have a special opportunity to make things better now. You have a voice that will ring louder than*

*some other people's. You have the power to call out other White people when they are being racist. You have the ability to help people be treated fairly. You have the power to create change and to be an ally."*

## **CONCLUSION**

Please give thought to your views on race in America. What do you know? What have you assumed? Are you willing to examine your life and your work vis-a-vis this issue? And, if you find that maybe you are not where you should be, are you willing to do something about it?