



OPINION / RACISM

## On the racism of race conversations

*Or why the US cannot have a meaningful national dialogue on race.*



by **Donald Earl Collins**  
28 Sept 2018



President Bill Clinton of his race initiative during his commencement address to graduating students at the University of California, San Diego on June 14, 1997 [File: AP/Mark J Terrill]

Americans seem to be holding an awkward and dehumanising national conversation on race on a regular basis. News and social media are constantly drawing attention to racist statements and incidents involving whites and people of colour, in which the former deny that the episode was racist, or declare that they themselves aren't racists.

Florida gubernatorial candidate Ron DeSantis' "monkey this up" racist nod towards his black opponent Andrew Gillum being downplayed is just one example of so many in which white people deny, deflect, or defend racism.

This dynamic is why the idea of any government-driven public conversation about racism is just a farce, whether it's President Donald Trump's proposal of a preposterous race summit with Colin Kaepernick and Kanye West, or President Barack Obama's 2009 "beer summit" with Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates and the police officer who arrested him, James Crowley.

Even the most well-meaning of leaders tend to feed Americans milquetoast statements about how much racial progress the US has made, if only to appease the white majority uncomfortable with the mere mention of American racism.

Usually, this happens in the language of "things have gotten better" since the days before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but "we still have a long way to go". As sociologist Crystal Marie Fleming points out in her book "How to Be Less Stupid About Race", stereotypes and self-serving statements on racial progress are the result of "living in a racist society," one that "socializes us to be stupid about race."

For some, though, the stupidity is of the willful kind, one steeped in me-first thinking.

Bill Clinton was the last US president who attempted to open a national dialogue on racism. He officially launched his Initiative on Race during a commencement speech at the University of California, San Diego on June 14, 1997. It started with his promise to complete "the unfinished work of our time, to lift the burden of race and redeem the promise of America" and established an advisory board of experts who were supposed to come up with "best practices" for racial reconciliation and dialogue.

But the board's final report, One America in the 21st Century, was dead on arrival when the White House released it to the public on September 18, 1998.

This wasn't just because Clinton was in the middle of a scandal for lying about his affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. It was because the president and his Initiative on Race followed the well-worn patterns of typical American conversations on racism. It

declared "victory" on racial reconciliation, despite the mountains of data pointing to an intricate web of systemic and everyday racism entangling the lives of Americans of colour.

As the late John Hope Franklin wrote in his presentation of the Advisory Board's final report to President Clinton: Many Americans held a widespread belief that "there was no crisis, and therefore, no reason to raise issues related to race".

My path to understanding the folly of conversations on American racism initiated by Clinton and other leaders began two weeks before his election in 1992. I was a second-year graduate student in a US history seminar at the University of Pittsburgh. The topic for discussion that day was, "Why has black economic mobility, political assimilation and cultural identity differed from other ethnic groups?"

For two-and-a-half hours, my white classmates contended that poor blacks weren't trying hard enough to rise out of poverty. Or, they believed that capitalism's sowing of economic inequality, and not systemic racism, was to blame for the disproportionately more pervasive black poverty.

I countered that white people expecting black people to make significant socioeconomic progress after generations of slavery and Jim Crow was really a justification for their racism, for clinging to racial stereotypes like "black laziness and intellectual inferiority".

One of my classmates, a middle-aged white male, decided to cut off my final point. "You should be grateful, to be able to go to an esteemed institution like the University of Pittsburgh, to be able to sit in that chair and get a PhD. If it were 30 years ago, we couldn't stand in the same Dairy Queen line, right here in Pittsburgh," he said, pointing at me as if I was a five-year-old throwing a tantrum.

The professor ended class right then and there, cutting off my attempt to respond. I stopped by his office the next afternoon to find out why he interfered. "You're going to have to deal with this anyway," he said while shrugging his shoulders as if, prior to 1992, I somehow hadn't seen or dealt with systemic racism or the racist slights of older white males.

As the lone African American in the classroom, no one understood my discomfort with white evaluations of blacks living with poverty because they were effectively assessing me and my upbringing in the process. And given the reactions of my professor and my older classmate, I was sure they didn't care to understand, either.

Like them, many white Americans only want dialogue on racism that will make them feel more comfortable with their racial privilege. Really, the racism discussion many Americans crave is one in which whites can pat themselves on the back for being good people without the need to do any anti-racist work at all.

That's why the press focuses more on "racial progress" statistics like whites marrying blacks and the decline of overt racism among younger Americans, and less on how redlining has led to material inequality for many Americans of colour.

That's why the American press tends to frame each instance of white people calling the police on unsuspecting people of colour for merely existing as isolated and not part of the larger continuum of virulent, everyday racism.

Denying and deflecting from attempts to call out systemic and individual racism, all while reinforcing racial stereotypes and inflicting additional pain, was also typical of President Clinton. His policy approaches to dealing with poverty and race made this all too clear.

Watching President Clinton crusade for his legacy-defining Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 was what helped convince me that his eventual Initiative on Race would be a sideshow.

"It's not racist for whites to assert that the culture of welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock pregnancy and absent fatherhood cannot be broken by social programmes unless there is first more personal responsibility," Clinton said in an October 1995 speech at the University of Texas-Austin.

He delivered that speech on the day of the Million Man March in Washington, DC. The White House presumably scheduled this event as a way for Clinton to distance himself from Nation of Islam Minister Louis Farrakhan, who organised the march and who was considered by some to hold anti-white and anti-Jewish views.

Clinton used the racist stereotype of lazy blacks on the government dole as justification for morphing social welfare into the welfare-to-work programme known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, even though the majority of welfare recipients were and remain white.

He did that all while also promising a mostly white audience a national chitchat on racism and triangulating on racial reconciliation, knowing that registered black Democrats like me had little choice but to support his allegedly pragmatic efforts in the voting booth in 1996.

Clinton's own words within the Initiative on Race Advisory Board's report 20 years ago, though, revealed to me the impossibility of any US president taking even baby steps to diminish racism's impact.

"I am a Scotch-Irish Southern Baptist and I'm proud of it. But [...] I have felt indescribable joy and peace in Black and Pentecostal churches. I have come to love the intensity and selflessness of my Hispanic fellow Americans toward la familia [...] I have also revelled in the festivals and the food, the music and the art and the culture of Native Americans..."

Clinton's narcissism and racism entitled him to see Americans of colour and their diverse cultures as simply food, song, reproduction and prayer, as mere sources of enjoyment and curiosity.

As his words and actions proved two decades ago, it's easier to point to superficial racial progress than it is to admit that American greatness has always been contingent on the material and emotional suffering of Americans of colour: on Trayvon Martins and Sandra Blands, on Ferguson and Charleston, on imprisoned and humiliated black and brown migrants, on Puerto Ricans left to drown.

We are more likely to see the world arriving at a solution to climate change before there's ever a Rwandan or South African-style Truth and Reconciliation process in the US on its historical and present-day racism.

***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.***

---