



OPINION / UNITED STATES

## Racism and narcissism: America's original sin

*The racist, narcissistic behaviour that characterises the Trump administration has its roots in US colonial history.*



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US President Donald Trump looks at supporters before boarding Air Force One after addressing a re-election campaign rally in Montoursville, Pennsylvania, on May 20, 2019 [Carlos Barria/Reuters]

US President Donald Trump is an unrepentant racist and a malignant narcissist, who also readily espouses Islamophobia, xenophobia, and misogyny. Evidence of his bigotry extends at least as far back as May 1989, when he placed a one-page advertisement in the

New York Daily News calling on New York state to execute the Central Park Five - five African American and Latino teens wrongfully accused of beating and raping a jogger.

As president, he has spewed so much hatred in his tweets and public speeches that white supremacists have felt emboldened and more comfortable publicly displaying and acting on their racist beliefs. This uncontrollable resurgence of nationalism has inspired various acts of racist aggression: From chants of "send her back" aimed at Congresswoman Ilhan Omar to mass shootings across the country, including most recently in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio.

So many in the United States bend over backwards to separate Trump's supporters from their expressions of racism and their admiration for his narcissism. Others seek to present Trumpism as a new phenomenon or an exception in American political history. The truth is the American society has always been a racist and narcissistic one.

Perhaps the most serious effort to address the psychological effect of American racism on white people belongs to African American sociologist and historian WEB Du Bois in his emblematic work, *Black Reconstruction*. In his book, he observes the behaviour of southern plantation owners and the corrosive effect of slavery on their psyche, concluding the following:

"[It] tended to inflate the ego of most planters beyond all reason; they became arrogant, strutting, quarrelsome kinglets; they issued commands; they made laws; they shouted their orders; they expected deference and self-abasement; they were choleric and easily insulted ... "

Slavery was abolished 150 years ago, but racism and the psychological effects it left behind have not disappeared. In fact, a lot of what Du Bois described coincides with what modern psychology has identified as the attributes of the narcissistic personality disorder.

According to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*, those include:

"1. A grandiose logic of self-importance

2. A fixation with fantasies of unlimited success, control, brilliance, beauty, or idyllic love

3. A credence that he or she is extraordinary and exceptional and can only be understood by, or should connect with, other extraordinary or important people or institutions
4. A desire for unwarranted admiration
5. A sense of entitlement
6. Interpersonally oppressive behavior
7. No form of empathy
8. Resentment of others or a conviction that others are resentful of him or her
9. A display of egotistical and conceited behaviors or attitudes"

A racist's narcissism need not be a personality disorder. As psychologists Jean Twenge and W Keith Campbell pointed out in *The Narcissism Epidemic*, many narcissists may appear to be "functioning well" by most social standards. At the societal level, racism and narcissism are really a flaw of the human condition, not a disorder.

Where American racism and narcissism come together is in the constant urge to maximise advantage over others and satiate the desire for greatness and wealth. This is mixed with a disdain for those who have been deemed lesser and the willful ignorance of the conditions in which they may suffer. In other words, racism and narcissism are two separate yet interdependent constructs, not a mental illness.

The American roots of these constructs are quite clear and reach back as far as the first colonies. Take the history of the Jamestown colony established in 1607. For four centuries, its story has been one of hard-working Englishman John Smith in the US and of the "good" Native American Pocahontas (her actual name was Amonute or Matoaka) saving his life when her "bad" Native American father Powhatan attempted to kill him.

This, however, never happened: Smith invented this story in 1624, years after Matoaka's death. And the actual story of Jamestown provides many examples of the racism and narcissism of the US's early colonialists.

Despite all the self-praise, the fact is that colonialists managed to survive only thanks to the help of Matoaka's tribe, the Pamunkey, during the winters of 1607, 1608, and 1609. The gold- and silver-seeking Englishmen, having no experience in farming or fishing, would have all died of starvation and disease before a resupply reached their colony.

Matoaka was also not the heroine of a wonderful romantic story. Colonists kidnapped her at the age of 16 in 1612 and held her captive for two years before another Englishman, John Rolfe, married her in 1614 and took her to England in 1616. She gave birth to a son along the way. Matoaka died in 1617 before she could make it back to Jamestown and to her people.

In the half-decade after her death, the Jamestown colony began growing tobacco as a cash crop and waged a war on the Pamunkey to conquer more land. Many of the growers of this cash crop were indentured servants from England, as well as the first African slaves in North America, kidnapped and brought to the Jamestown colony in August 1619.

Even at this early stage of what would become the US, all the elements of the US's racism and narcissism were in place: A sense of entitlement, a belief in one's own exceptionalism and oppressive behaviour towards others, a lack of empathy and an obsession with power.

They remain just as strong today. The successors of those early colonists are still obsessed with myth-making, engage in self-aggrandisement and pursue riches, greatness, and empire. They still seek to exploit those designated as "others" and are indifferent to their suffering. They also use any slight or excuse to resort to the wanton destruction of people and the erasure of their cultures.

American racism and narcissism stand at the core of government policies that aim to: maintain detention camps for Latinx asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border, cut social welfare programmes for vulnerable populations to shield perpetrators of police brutality, criminalise communities of colour, dispossess Native Americans of their land and ban Muslims from entering the country.

While Trump and his supporters epitomise American racism and narcissism, millions of Americans exhibit such tendencies across the political spectrum. This is why racism and narcissism remain the core elements of the US's original sin.

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

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