

**Foundations and the Fallacy of a Post-Racial America:
African American Men and Civic Engagement**

by Emmett D. Carson, Ph. D.

Clinton School of Public Service
University of Arkansas
Little Rock, Arkansas
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Emmett D. Carson, Ph. D., is an international thought leader in the field of philanthropy. As founding CEO of Silicon Valley Community Foundation in 2006, he led the unprecedented merger of two of the largest community foundations in the world. Today, with over \$3 billion under management, Emmett oversees the community foundation's work with donors and corporations whose giving is responsible for it being both the largest grantmaker to Bay Area nonprofit organizations and the largest international grantmaker among community foundations in the U.S.

Before this, Emmett had a distinguished 12 year career as CEO of The Minneapolis Foundation and, prior to that, oversaw the Ford Foundation's U.S. and global grantmaking program on philanthropy and nonprofit sector. Emmett has published more 100 works on philanthropy and is an authority on issues of social justice, public accountability and African American giving. He is consistently recognized as one of the most influential nonprofit leaders in the U.S. and has honorary degrees from Indiana University, Morehouse College and The National Hispanic University. Emmett received both his master's and Ph.D. degrees in public and international affairs from Princeton University and his bachelor's degree in economics, Phi Beta Kappa, from Morehouse College.

Introduction

Of all the questions of discrimination and prejudice that still exist in our society, the most perplexing one is the oldest, and in some ways today, the newest: the problem of race. Can we fulfill the promise of America by embracing all our citizens of all races.... In short, can we become one America in the 21st century?¹

With these words, former President Bill Clinton announced his intention to lead the American people in “a great and unprecedented conversation about race.” His hope was to create One America in which every citizen, regardless of race, recognizes their shared dreams and has access to equal opportunity. Shared dreams and equal opportunity are the avenues through which citizens become engaged in the civic life of their communities, allowing strangers to become neighbors, strengthening the social fabric of America’s civil society. Without question, the most visible example of the nation’s progress on race relations is the two-term election of President Barack Obama.

Unfortunately, President Obama’s election did not usher in a new dialogue on race relations as many hoped. Paradoxically, it reinforced the false ideas that racial equality in America has been achieved and a dialogue on race relations is unnecessary. In this post-racial America it is presumed that an individual’s success is largely based on one’s own talents, aspirations and fate, and that a person’s race or ethnicity is largely irrelevant in determining his or her future socio-economic success. Some proponents of this view go even further, suggesting that efforts to address disparities by focusing on a specific race amounts to reverse discrimination by giving a particular group an unfair advantage.

The widespread acceptance of a post-racial society is at odds with the divisive national debates that ensued along racial lines following the tragic shooting deaths of Trayvon Martin

and Oscar Grant, among others. These incidents show how questions of race, especially when it involves African American men, continue to divide America. The belief in a post-racial society has had several unfortunate consequences, including preventing foundations from acting to research and document racial disparities, determine their cause, encourage dialogue around the findings and support solutions.

If we are living in a post-racial society, there is no better group to examine than African American men and boys--who without question have been subjected to harsh treatment throughout American history--to determine the veracity of the claim of a post-racial society. In 2010, foundations contributed \$29 million to programs exclusively focused on African American men and boys, a modest increase over previous years.² While this amount may appear significant, it is actually less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the \$45.7 billion awarded by America's 76,000 grantmaking institutions in 2010.³ Such a small amount is only justified if one believes that African American men and boys face no systemic issues of racial discrimination or that their dismal socio-economic status has not reached a level of dysfunction that affects the larger society.

This essay begins with a short primer on African American history. Culture and history matter. They provide the necessary context for understanding the how and why of where groups find themselves. The next three sections provide rationales for why foundations should engage in specific programs aimed at supporting African American males: the mythology of a post-racial society, saving an endangered species and ensuring global competitiveness. While this essay focuses on African American males, it is important to note that these positions can

form the philosophical basis for supporting programs directed to assist any segment of Americans; for example, Native Americans and whites in Appalachia and women.

Before continuing, it is important to address the inevitable questions that will arise about perceptions of my own bias. For the record, I am an African American male who is CEO of a major foundation. Unfortunately, there is a history that when people of color or women raise an issue of concern with regard to their own group their points of view are often dismissed as being biased. This same potential bias by a group member may also bring perspective and insight that would otherwise be missed by others. It is my hope that this essay promotes discussion based on its analysis and not the race of its author.

A Primer on African American History

To say that America has had a complex and difficult relationship with people of African descent is a gross understatement. America was built using slave labor in which Africans and their American-born children were abused, humiliated and treated worse than domesticated animals. The Civil War to resolve the slavery question resulted in the deaths of over 600,000 Americans and created a political split in the country that remains to this day. Under Jim Crow, African Americans lived a separate and unequal existence in which they could fight and die for America's freedoms in World War II and Vietnam but could not enjoy the full citizenship rights of white Americans to go to school where they were capable, walk through the front door of any store, live where they wanted or vote without fear of intimidation.

The Civil Rights Movement was fought and won by African Americans and their supporters, who were targeted for assassination, beaten and economically punished by people acting individually and on behalf of government. With the Supreme Court's historic 1954 Brown

v. Board of Education decision that found segregation to be inherently unequal, and with passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the doors to equal opportunity for all were pried open. For many, the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 and his re-election in 2012 was definitive evidence that America had entered a post-racial society in which opportunity for African Americans was no longer limited by race.

While the practice of slavery and Jim Crow have long since ended, America's cultural legacy of dehumanizing African Americans remains deeply embedded within its culture, to the detriment of all concerned. It is not accidental or happenstance that time and time again African American males are the targets of violence that re-open the national wound around race relations. There is an unbroken line stretching from before Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin, providing examples to every generation of African American men that they are potential targets of violence. The stark evidence of this is that we neither see the same recurring acts of violence against males of other races and ethnicities, nor do we see national discussions ensue along racial lines when such rare events occur.

The reasons for the acceptance of violence involving African American men are complex and rooted in America's history of slavery. Slave owners understood that for slavery to be accepted and perpetuated, African Americans had to be dehumanized within American culture. To justify the brutality of slavery, it was essential that African Americans be seen as property akin to beasts of burden, devoid of either intelligence or morality. It is this legacy of prejudice and distrust that President Clinton hoped to address in a national discussion about race. Notwithstanding President Obama's election victories, it remains unfinished business.

This is an admittedly abbreviated and incomplete summary of the history of African Americans. It is provided to underscore the fact that public policy discussions about African Americans have to be different because their history in America demands it. The histories of other racial and ethnic groups are equally unique and must be similarly considered and understood. To discuss the disproportionate incarceration rates of African American men and not understand the historical and contemporary uses of the criminal justice system to provide free labor and quell African American dissent is simply choosing to ignore well-documented facts.⁴ Because all racial groups do not begin with the same histories, it is simply not rational to believe that those histories magically become irrelevant because it is declared that America is a post-racial society.

The Mythology of a Post-racial Society

At the heart of our nation's and foundations' inability to engage in a discussion on race is the belief that America has entered a post-racial era, thereby making any consideration of race discriminatory and evidence of reverse racism. By exclusively focusing on individual examples of success, proponents of a post-racial society conveniently ignore asking about the status of the entire group. In fact, individual success is taken as evidence that the group's success is only limited by individual effort and not by systemic barriers. If at least one member of the group can achieve, the thinking goes, why can't all? And, if all can't achieve, then it must be due to their personal shortcomings and unrelated to intentional or unintentional institutional discrimination.

The idea of a post-racial America poses at least two conceptual problems. First, assume that despite the persistent claims, America really has not entered a post-racial era. If so, then

our unwillingness to even consider whether racial disparities exist means that we are consigning our fellow Americans to be subjected to discrimination. We can only determine if racial disparities exist by collecting and analyzing data, a practice that is discouraged by the presumption that America has entered a post-racial era. Second, let's assume that research data supports that America is now a post-racial society. If we find that a particular racial or ethnic group is consistently failing to realize the American dream, it is not in the country's self-interest to allow that group to be in perpetual crisis. The country as a whole, and foundations in particular, have a moral imperative to determine the cause of the disparity and correct it to ensure that both the group and the nation prosper. The irrational situation today is that the unquestioning belief in the existence of a post-racial society prevents us from knowing whether racial disparities exist and, if they do exist, prevents us from acting because to act on the basis of race would be discriminatory.

Let's examine how this plays out for African American men. Why have African Americans as a whole been unable to make significant progress with regard to mortality rates, incarceration, housing and education? Who is responsible? Who should be held accountable? Through the lens of a post-racial society, the answer is that the only explanation is due to the personal failings of individuals to make full use of the opportunities that are available. By definition, there can be no institutional racism, and any effort to improve the socio-economic status of African American men amounts to reverse discrimination against other groups.

Such circular reasoning should be anathema to foundations whose mission is the love of humankind. To allow any group to live a perpetually lower quality of life, whatever the reason, without trying to determine and correct the cause, is acting contrary to their mission. To do so

makes it virtually impossible for members of the group to participate in civil society for their own benefit and for the benefit of the nation. An extreme example illustrates this point. If a foundation concludes that the primary reason so many African American men are unable to succeed is due to their collective lack of personal responsibility, then the appropriate response, consistent with its mission, would be to support efforts to change that behavior. It is not an acceptable response for foundations; upon learning that a particular racial group faces ongoing socio-economic challenges, to simply choose to ignore it.

Saving an Endangered Species

The term “endangered species” is used to describe a species that in full, or in part, is at risk of becoming extinct. In many ways, a significant segment of African Americans, especially men and boys, come close to meeting this definition with regard to life expectancy, health and economic survival. As with most endangered species, the warning signs have existed for a long time. In describing the socio-economic conditions facing African Americans at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote:

Of the good things in life, the Negro has approximately one half those of whites. Of the bad things of life, he has twice those of whites. Thus half of all Negroes live in substandard housing. And Negroes have half the income of whites. ... There are twice as many unemployed. The rate of infant mortality among Negroes is double that of whites...⁵

Since Dr. King made this observation, individual African Americans have had many successes: the first African American President and other elected officials, CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, entertainment and sport figures and even university and foundation presidents. And yet, despite these impressive individual achievements, when viewing the collective socio-economic advancement of African Americans, Dr. King’s axiom that African Americans get half of

the good things and double the bad things of whites continues to ring true. Consider these statistics:

- African American infants are twice as likely as white infants to die before their first birthday.⁶
- Diabetes is the fourth leading cause of death among African Americans.⁷
- Today, nearly half—48 percent—of all African American boys drop out of high school and 42 percent of all black boys have failed an entire grade at least once.⁸
- African American boys are three times more likely than white boys to be suspended or expelled from school and with Latino boys represent nearly 80 percent of youth in special education. African American boys also comprise 20 percent of students classified as mentally retarded while being only 9 percent of the student population.⁹
- In 2010, African American men accounted for 70 percent of all new HIV infections among adults and adolescents, which is seven times the rate of white men. It is estimated that in their lifetimes, a total of 1 in 16 African American men and 1 in 32 African American women will be infected with HIV. By the end of 2009, over a quarter of a million African Americans had died from HIV.¹⁰
- It is estimated that 1 in 6 African American men have been incarcerated and 1 in 100 African American women are in prison. Nearly half of the total prison population consists of African Americans.¹¹ Prison is the new slavery and has become the unspoken economic development engine for rural America.
- African Americans account for nearly 49 percent of all homicides victims in the U.S. They are usually men and boys, and 93 percent of them were killed by another African American male.¹²
- The poverty rate of African Americans is 27 percent, compared to 9.8 percent for white Americans. The median household income of African Americans is 61 percent of that of white Americans, roughly \$32,229 compared to \$55,412.¹³

The litany of statistics detailing current racial disparities by health, employment, income and wealth¹⁴ goes on and on and on. These statistics, which have existed for decades, have sparked no national debate, only limited efforts by foundations or elected officials to determine their cause, and no suggestion that any significant amount of public or private resources will be

expended to search for solutions. The deafening silence of national indifference to these conditions is itself evidence of the need for a dialogue on race.

A community in such dire distress simply cannot and should not be ignored by foundations that are afraid to act because they fear being called discriminatory in a post-racial society or lack the courage of their convictions to pursue politically incorrect solutions. It doesn't matter whether a foundation is driven by progressive or conservative values. Each has an obligation to advance programs that they believe will change the catastrophic conditions faced by African American men and boys. It is impossible to think that any group struggling for its daily survival will have the time, energy or emotional capacity to adequately participate in the democratic process of civil society. And, when such groups cannot participate, they are only further marginalized within the larger society, posing a danger to themselves and others.

Foundations focused on providing quality education cannot be true to their missions and still ignore racial disparities in educational achievement. Foundations committed to improving healthcare cannot ignore the impact of diabetes, heart disease and AIDS that are disproportionately impacting the African American community. And foundations committed to social justice cannot ignore the disproportionate violence that permeates and is perpetrated on the African American community, nor the ongoing use of the criminal justice system as a way of controlling African American men. Moreover, it is not sufficient for a foundation engaged in education, for example, to say that the educational gap will be addressed by focusing on low-income people, a disproportionate number of whom are African American males. Foundations

must be prepared to tailor programs to respond to the challenges of culture and to the context of specific racial and ethnic groups.¹⁵

Ensuring Global Competitiveness

Today we live in a world where the Internet allows almost everyone, living anywhere, to sell anything, buy anything, learn about anything and have an opinion on everything. When half of African American boys are unable to graduate from high school, it is a certainty that they will be unable to compete for the best jobs at home or in the global marketplace. In such a world, unless something is done, a significant number of African American men will increasingly and disproportionately find themselves living at the margins of society. The choice is whether it is better to cultivate and develop the potential talent of these men and boys to lead productive lives or allow their potential to be squandered as they are disproportionately killed, jailed and make the country less globally competitive.

For America to remain competitive, it is imperative that we ensure that every American is able to fulfill his or her potential. It is this recognition that led billionaire businessman George Soros to invest in the future of African American males and America's future. He states:

Through the Open Society Foundations, I have worked for many years to address the systemic injustices that prevent so many African American men from achieving their full potential. In New York City alone, for example, about 50 percent of African American men do not finish high school. The poverty rate for African American and Latino young men is 50 percent higher and their unemployment rate 60 percent higher than for their Caucasian and Asian counterparts. African American men are seven times more likely to have an incarcerated parent. More than 30 percent of all African American men become caught up in the criminal justice system. This squandering of human capital is a disgrace.¹⁶

America can never reach its full potential in a global economy as long as African American men and boys fail to reach their full potential. Foundations concerned about

America's future economic prosperity cannot sit on the sidelines while a major talent pool is wasted and simultaneously drains scarce human and financial resources that could be put to more productive uses.

Conclusion

In his call for One America, President Clinton astutely observed that the historic divisions between white and African Americans had grown to include divisions across various racial and ethnic groups.

More than 30 years ago, at high tide of the civil rights movement, the Kerner Commission said we were becoming two Americas, one white, one black, separate and unequal. Today, we face a different choice: will we become not two, but many Americas, separate, unequal and isolated? ... That is the unfinished work of our time, to lift the burden of race and redeem the promise of America.¹⁷

To break down the isolation that exists between different racial and ethnic communities requires the recognition that there are indeed different racial and ethnic communities.

Engaging all Americans in the civic discourse that distinguishes American democracy requires a celebration and respect for diversity, not the belief in a false and circular ideology of a post-racial America in which everyone is presumed to have achieved colorlessness. To lift the burden of race, we must be able to talk about it. The problem with the mythology of a post-racial society is that it has short-circuited any discussion on race by assuming a reality that has yet to be proven. The mythology discourages any action by foundations or others if racial disparities are found to exist by suggesting that such action would be reverse discrimination.

In the case of African American men, there is ample evidence that they have experienced--and continue to experience--significant socio-economic challenges that also have negative spillover effects for the larger society. This should compel foundations to act

consistently with their values and mission statements to develop race-specific approaches to ameliorate these conditions. Foundations have a responsibility to address problems where they find them, in the ways that they think will benefit both the group in question as well as the larger community. Undeniably, this will be difficult and challenging work, and foundations will face intense criticism by those who value the myth of colorlessness over the reality of racial disparities. However, foundations have an obligation to fulfill their missions for a higher good, and if their current leadership cannot summon the courage to tackle these issues, then they should recruit board members, CEOs and staff who can do so.

Endnotes

¹ Transcript of Remarks by President Clinton at University of California at San Diego Commencement, June 14, 1997.

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¹⁴ Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*, Routledge: New York, 1995.

¹⁵ Jacqueline Copeland-Carson, "The My Brother's Keeper Initiative: A Collaborative Philanthropy Strategy to Address America's Black Male Crisis," unpublished report commissioned by the Ford Foundation, June 2008, p. 25.

¹⁶ Where Do We Go From Here?: Philanthropic Support for Black Men and Boys, Open Society Foundations and Foundation Center, October 2012, p. 36.

¹⁷ Transcript of Remarks by President Clinton at University of California at San Diego Commencement, June 14, 1997.