

## Probing our racial consciousness

It's sad that one of the most important discussions we Americans need to have has now become nearly impossible and that instead of minimizing the distance between us various forces have actually pushed us farther apart. I'm speaking of course of race and how it influences our families and communities, our schools, our military, our politics, our attitudes and our society in general. Instead of using the last five decades of progress as proof that bad situations can be improved upon and that on the basis of that experience we can speak openly and honestly about race, certain special interest groups have made it more problematic for people to sit down and talk without fear of recrimination.

That's a lament, but laments aren't going to change the situation.

In order to find a viable *space* or opportunity to sit down with one another we're going to need to enlist powerful champions from all races who will push for the idea of having nationwide sit-downs on race. And we must have an all hands on deck approach to populating those conversations with representative voices from ALL of our many racial *neighborhoods* - from government, industry, our faith-based organizations and churches, academia, the military and from ordinary families. It's time to stop disadvantaging all of us for the sake of advantaging some of us by only listening to the most vocal activist groups. While these groups do represent some of our citizens they don't speak for all of those who feel oppressed and should not be the only voices heard. Shrillness should never be confused with soundness.

Improving our understanding of different points of view will not be accomplished by violent protests, burning, looting, defunding the police, releasing repeat offenders from their sentences or by condoning law-breaking. Solving America's race-related problems will not be accomplished by simply throwing money at those groups who feel marginalized, ignored, forgotten or worse yet by reversing the race oppressor/victim equation. That will only create *new* victims and make further dialogue impossible. Unfortunately, that is just what is happening as I write these very words. Racism is being committed in the name of anti-racism by abandoning the inherent fairness of meritocracy as a means to decide winners and losers.

Race and diversity are not skills and should never take precedence over talent, experience, ability and knowledge. They should also never become THE deciding factor in the hiring or firing of people or anything in between. Race should never be used as a negotiating tactic or as a means to gain advantage over others in ANY situation. It must never be allowed to be used as a tool for brainwashing young minds (or even older ones) to accept that their race is responsible for the ills of all races - or even one select one - and it should NEVER be used as a political weapon to sway voters or to incite violence.

How can we talk about race? Assuming we have found our champions and have agreed to sit down with one another we can start by agreeing that while race relations in America is a problem that it is not THE most critical problem facing us. We can then establish some ground rules for discussing the issue and then use the same set of data as a basis for discussion. Finally, we need to keep our emotions in check and stick to the facts. These are pretty common discussion tools that are used by many people to come to grips with thorny situations and they are continually being used for one simple reason...they work. So why shouldn't they work with a dialogue on race?

Black words may have conditioned us.

Most of us live in our conscious minds. That said, we are not always aware of what has influenced our subconscious minds over time. A case could be made that Americans (all people really) have grown up with a very specific mindset that is as old as time itself. That mindset is that day (light) is positive and night (darkness) is dangerous.

The *known* lives in the bright light of day and that the *unknown* (or potentially harmful) resides in the shadows of night. In other words, there are two polar opposites - black and white. On the one we trust and on the other we don't...and fear. It can be said that this primordial value judgment has influenced not only our conscious lives but our subconscious ones as well. From this inherited value judgment, many of our concepts have flowed and have influenced the words we have used to describe them. For instance, there are: black arts, black magic, black Friday, black ops, black moods, black sheep, blacklist, etc. Probably the most obvious and classic American example of this is represented in cowboy lore where those wearing black hats were the *bad guys* and those with white hats represented the *good guys*. This seems to have popularized the whole concept of something black representing bad or evil while white connotes the good and pure.

Now I'm not claiming that this concept is purposeful or that it has been designed to deliberately insert a subconscious value judgment in us. What I am saying is that some of our attitudes towards each other may be the result of truly ancient beliefs such as the night versus day argument; others have come to us recently. We ought to keep these things in mind when (and if) we get to the point of discussing race.

So where do we go from here?

We can keep doing what we're doing, allowing the shrill voices of the special interests to dominate the narrative and thereby risk the further deterioration of our race relations or we can summon up the courage to confront our fears and do something before it's too late, before events overtake us. Fear of doing the right thing should never be an excuse for inaction.

*Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of eleven books, four of which are on American politics. He operates a political news story aggregator website, [www.projectpushback.com](http://www.projectpushback.com) and can be reached at: [stephan@stephanhelgesen.com](mailto:stephan@stephanhelgesen.com)*