

Systemic Racism in the United States – an analysis

by Phillip W. Weiss

In my essay *Is the United States a Racist Nation*, I concluded that race relations are still far from settled but that the United States is not a racist nation. This essay now considers the subject of systemic racism from a historical context.

Systemic racism is disparate treatment due exclusively to race. Systemic racism is as old as that nation itself. From the moment of its founding, the nation had to deal with systemic racism. At the time of its founding, the population of the United States included a substantial number of blacks, almost all of whom were slaves. In fact, blacks were the only group who were slaves. This condition of enforced servitude continued for decades until the Civil War when slavery was abolished and blacks became citizens.

Slavery was gone but racism remained. French historian and social commentator Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

The moderns, then, after they have abolished slavery, have three prejudices to contend against, which are less easy to attack and far less easy to conquer than the mere fact of servitude: the prejudice of the master, the prejudice of the race, and the prejudice of color.

Thus, despite the change in the political status of blacks, racial discrimination continued, this time in the form of Jim Crowism, a euphemistic term for the legal segregation of blacks, based on the general legal principle of separate but equal. Under that doctrine, racial segregation was legitimized and codified in law. States and localities were, as a matter of public policy, permitted to deny blacks equal access to public resources. This situation became most obvious in the area of politics in which blacks were legally denied equal ability to exercise the right to vote. De Tocqueville wrote:

There is a natural prejudice which prompts men to despise whomsoever has been their inferior long after he has become their equal.

Soon, two nations emerged in the United States, one white and one black. This situation became most acutely apparent in the military in which white and black troops were separated based on race. By the end of World War Two, the United States military, ostensibly unified under one command, was divided into two components, one white army and the other black.

For a variety of reasons, after World War Two blacks became increasingly fed up with Jim Crowism. This led to a prolonged and intense period of civil rights activism to abolish Jim Crowism. This activism reached its zenith in the mid-1960s with the passage of legislation of federal civil rights laws that banned Jim Crowism in all of its forms.

Although Jim Crowism was now banned, racial barriers remained. Massive demographic shifts in populations soon transformed American cities into racial

ghettos. The racial ghettoization of the cities continues to this day. The private sector has attempted to reverse this process of urban ghettoization through massive investment of resources to gentrify the inner cities, but this effort, despite some impressive results, has met with only minimal success. Today, US cities are still racial ghettos, and are in the worst shape now then they have been in decades.

One legacy of Jim Crowism that continued to resonate long after Jim Crowism was abolished was passage of laws that criminalized a slew of social and culturally based behaviors that were practiced in the black community. This automatically put blacks more at risk of being arrested and convicted of a crime. Soon, blacks were being incarcerated at a rate that vastly exceeded their percentage of the population. This in turn produced a demand for reforms of the justice system, including policies and practices governing law enforcement deemed unfair and discriminatory. Local and state governments have responded by enacting so-called police reforms, including defunding of police departments, that place restraints on the police. As a result, crime in inner cities, where persons of color comprise the majority of the population, is soaring, with blacks at highest risk of being victims. In response, the public, including many blacks, are calling for more police to restore law and order. While blacks comprise a disproportionate percentage of persons incarcerated, they also comprise a disproportionate percentage of persons who are victims. This arguably is evidence of systemic racism.

Evidence of systemic racism persists, for instance, in the re-segregation of American social and cultural institutions, especially the public schools which in some localities are virtually devoid of white students. Some American inner cities are virtually all-black. As a result, the United States is more divided than ever, even more so than when Jim Crowism was legal. This development can be attributed to race. This raises another question: with the abolition of slavery and legal Jim Crowism, are blacks today still at a disadvantage?

Legally, blacks have the exact same rights as everyone else. Yet, it can be argued that in a nation that is acutely conscious of and obsessed with race, blacks are at a disadvantage. De Tocqueville wrote:

Thus the negro transmits the eternal mark of his ignominy to all his descendants; and although the law may abolish slavery, God alone can obliterate the traces of its existence.

Blackness cannot be concealed. It is obvious to all and thus can be a source of shame and stigmatization, especially in a race-obsessed society in which most of the population are not black and in which the memory of slavery is kept alive. This makes the black experience one that is unique to blacks alone.

While the country has made immense progress in improving race relations, much more still needs to be done. What is at stake is the survival of the United States. In 1851 De Tocqueville wrote:

The most formidable of all the ills which threaten the future existence of the United States, arises from the presence of a black population upon its territory...

One hundred seventy years later, the black population is still present and are here to stay, and race still is an issue. This takes us to the question of whether systemic racism still exists in the United States. Unlike in the past when systemic racism did exist as exemplified in social institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, today, with slavery and Jim Crow abolished, the answer to whether systemic racism still exists can only be inferred, though not entirely ruled out. Given the racial ghettoization of the inner cities and racial disparities in the areas of health, education and other indices, the question of systemic racism remains a valid subject for debate.

Nevertheless, the debate over systemic racism notwithstanding, the United States is inherently NOT a racist nation. Unlike politicians and activists who deliberately antagonize people, spread discord and sow the seeds of hatred, all to promote self-serving political agendas, some of which are so violent that they rock the nation to the core, Americans in general do not harbor hostile sectarian feelings toward their fellow Americans. In fact, despite repeated attempts by organizations and groups to incite Americans to tear down the United States, the nation remains intact, impervious to all attempts to destroy it.¹

The fact is that most Americans are more interested in making a living, supporting their families and getting through each day than picking fights with their neighbors. During times of national emergency, Americans always manage to set aside racial and ethnic differences and unite as one people on behalf of the nation.

¹ Protest movements that have rocked the nation include but are not limited to the South seceding from the Union, the IWW movement, the Pullman Strike, the Ku Klux Klan movement, the American Nazi movement, the 1960s anti-war movement, international terrorism culminating in the 9/11/01 attack, the 99-percent movement, the 2020 anti-police protests, and, possibly, the 2021 attack on the US Capitol building (the last of which was a political rally that became violent).

That is a historical fact that no amount of historical revisionism can suppress. If the United States was truly racist, the nation would have ceased to exist long ago. The United States would have fragmented into racial enclaves. That has never happened and, in fact, has never even come close to happening. The United States remains united under one flag and one federal constitution to which every American, regardless of race, pledges their allegiance, whether they stand, sit, or kneel.

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