

## Race and the American Presidency – The intersection of past and present

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### Abstract

*Race matters in the United States. And because race has always mattered in this country, it is important to understand the history of this country in this context. If we are to understand the United States today, it is important to understand the attitudes and policies with respect to race that have impacted the country over the years – how they have changed and, in too many instances, how they have stayed the same.*

*An important aspect of American racial reality that has been overlooked has to do with the racial policies of the men who have been President of the United States. From George Washington to Barack Obama to Donald Trump, each of the forty-five presidents has played an important role in the national discussion on race. The singular and collective impact of these men on American racial issues is undeniable and worthy of special attention.*

*Five American presidents have been chosen to provide a sampling of why it is important to understand that race has always mattered in this country. Race also has mattered to each president, and it is important to know how the actions and policies of each president have been informed and affected in this regard*

*It is noted that African Diaspora Development Programs are neither a panacea nor a universal solution for the various problems and challenges encountered by a majority of African nations. Nevertheless, a coordinated set of strategies that address the need for financial capital as well as human capital can make a huge difference in the African present and in the African future.*

*As further noted, for these initiatives to be successful there will be a need to focus on the members of the African Diaspora and the concept of full (or partial) repatriation while also looking to improve and enhance the business environment of African countries. It is submitted that such a comprehensive and coordinated effort can bring about permanent and institutional positive change create a future for the people of Africa that includes realized dreams.*

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### Race and the U.S. Presidency

The French historian and commentator, Alexis de Tocqueville, visited the new United States almost 200 years ago. At that time he observed that the single most critical and divisive issue in this country was race. The stark contrast between the stated ideals of America – liberty, the recognition and protection of rights – and the brutal and inhumane reality of legalized race-based slavery was always and forever irreconcilable.

It took the most violent war in the history of the nation with over 600,000 deaths and almost as many casualties just to abolish slavery. It took several amendments to the Constitution, multiple Supreme Court decisions and countless national, state and local laws to establish even partial recognition of the rights and humanity and dignity of black Americans. And, as you are reading this, the status of black Americans in this country is too often characterized by poverty, incarceration and huge canyons of inequity, despair and hopelessness.

The integration of peoples, races and creeds, the creation of a homogenous society, the development of a singular nation typically take place over long periods of time. America's lukewarm and halfhearted efforts at the legal and cultural inclusion of black Americans only began after the Civil War so one could argue that not enough time has elapsed.

Yet during that same period of time the descendants of Irish immigrants who were despised upon their arrival have taken their place as full and complete residents in the American mainstream. The same transition can be observed with respect to Asians, Italians, Slavs, Indians and Jews. Members of all of these ethnic groups were treated poorly, were marginalized and were barely on the fringes of respectable American society. But their descendants are fully included and invested in these United States, and when they sleep they are comforted by the American Dream.

Whether we look at Ferguson, Missouri or Tulsa, Oklahoma or the sick and sad tradition of lynching black Americans over a period of one hundred years after Emancipation, we know that the condition of black Americans has been different from that of the members of any of the ethnic groups mentioned. Mass incarceration, inflated infant mortality rates, depressed life expectancy, inequity, inequality and the constant struggle with the faithless hypocrisy and denial of white America have all served to provide nothing less than the American nightmare for black Americans when they try to sleep.

Race matters in this country. And because race has always mattered in this country, it is important to understand the history of this country in this context. If we are to understand the United States today, it is important to understand the attitudes and policies with respect to race over the years – how they have changed and, in too many instances how they have stayed the same. An important aspect of American racial reality that has been overlooked has to do with the racial policies of the men who have been President of the United States. From George Washington to Barack Obama to Donald Trump, each of the forty five presidents has played an important role in the national discussion on race.

The "peculiar institution" called slavery was a major and constant factor in the early years of the United States that loomed large over the first few decades of American presidential history. It is important to note that eight of the first ten presidents of this country were slave owners.

Consider that George Washington kept some 300 slaves at his Mount Vernon plantation. Thomas Jefferson around 175 servants and fathered several slave children with one of his slaves, who was also the sister of his wife. And James Madison, James Monroe and Andrew Jackson all owned dozens of slaves.

And it is equally important to recognize that although in modern America there is virtually universal recognition of the wrongs of slavery, the names and images of these presidential slave owners are on American currency, Mount Rushmore, universities, cities, streets, bridges, airports and countless other places of honor. Some presidents have exacerbated the situation, some engaged in willful ignorance and some engaged in efforts to promote change, sometimes on the margins, sometimes in a more substantive way.

Five presidents have been chosen to provide a small sampling of why it is important to understand that not only does race matter in this country, race also has mattered to each president, and it is important to know what each president has done in this regard.

### **George Washington**

The first president of the United States owned slaves from the age of ten. Upon his marriage to the wealthy widow Martha Custis, he not only became one of the richest men in the country, he also presided over the Mount Vernon estate in Virginia on which labored over three hundred slaves – men, women and children who George Washington owned, bought and sold. Over three hundred slaves of African descent over which he literally held the power of life and death.

Historians will usually agree that there was never an easy life for slaves who could be beaten, killed or sold on the whim of their owners. As a large slave estate, Mount Vernon was the site of a

harsh life for the men, women and children who were the property of George Washington. During his illustrious career Washington was known to have demanded the return to slavery of black men and women who had sided with British during the Revolutionary War based on the promise of freedom by the British. Washington demanded the return of the “property” of slave owners, condemning hundreds of men and women to a return to misery.

George Washington was also known to have expressed doubts regarding the viability of slavery in a country dedicated to principles of freedom and liberty, but he went along with the legalization of slavery in the new republic when the Constitution was ratified with slavery left untouched. Washington never freed a slave during his lifetime although he has the dubious distinction of being the only so-called Founding Father to free his slaves.

### **James Monroe**

The fifth President of the United States was one of the most popular presidents in American history and he was also a slave owner. During his lifetime he managed to acquire a large plantation that depended upon the labor of many slaves. There is no record of how many slaves that James Monroe owned, but it is known that he sold slaves on numerous occasions in order to pay off debts occasioned by his lavish lifestyle.

As president, Monroe articulated a view of slavery and black Americans that was held by many white Americans at the time. The thinking was that while slavery was not a sustainable institution and would and should disappear over time, black Americans were inferior and simply unfit to ever be full citizens in the United States. Therefore, the thinking went on, black Americans should be repatriated to Africa, from whence their people came. And during his administration, a large number of black Americans were indeed sent to West Africa and established what is now the nation of Liberia – the capital, Monrovia, having been named for President James Monroe.

It should be noted that the black Americans transported to what is now Liberia were not necessarily descendants of people in that area of West Africa. Also, the people indigenous to this area were not consulted on the matter and were in effect colonized by the black Americans who had returned at the behest of white Americans.

The Liberian experiment was not replicated but the idea of repatriating black Americans was a strategy that was supported by numerous opponents and supporters of slavery right through the Civil War. Ironically, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a significant number of black Americans supported Marcus Garvey and his Back to Africa movement – a 20<sup>th</sup> century version of James Monroe’s black repatriation plan.

### **Rutherford B. Hayes**

Rutherford B. Hayes is best known as being one of only three presidents who were elected without winning the popular vote (the others being George W. Bush in 2000 and Donald J. Trump in 2016). When his contest with New York State Governor Samuel Tilden in 1876 went to the Electoral College, representatives of Hayes, then the governor of Ohio, were able to convince delegations from states that were part of the Confederacy just eleven years earlier, that he would withdraw federal troops from the South if he was elected president with their support.

The deal was done and being true to his word, when he was inaugurated as the 19<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, Hayes withdrew federal troops from the South, thereby ending the Reconstruction Era. With the withdrawal of federal troops, a reign of terror began for black Americans who lived in the former Confederate States of America. The decade following the inauguration of Rutherford B. Hayes saw the rise of the Ku Klux Klan terrorist regime, the imposition of the American version of apartheid – Jim Crow laws - and the intentional, systematic and purposeful removal of all of the constitutional rights of black Americans, beginning with the right to vote.

What progress had been made by black Americans evaporated with the inauguration of Rutherford B. Hayes and 140 years later millions of black Americans are still seeking equity, justice and equality, not only in the South but throughout these United States. Hayes has been able to hide in the mists of history, but he played a major role in ending Reconstruction and returning black Americans to a status of subjugation and oppression.

He was not a Klansman, but without Rutherford B. Hayes as president, there might not have been a Klan. Rutherford B. Hayes was not a race terrorist, but he enabled the race terrorists in the South who killed countless black Americans. Rutherford B. Hayes also set the stage for the so-called Great Migration of black Americans from the South although "migration" may not have been the correct word to use, since many of the "migrants" were actually refugees from the terror that was American South.

### **Chester A. Arthur**

Chester A. Arthur was a New York attorney who became the 21<sup>st</sup> President of the United States due to tragedy. He had been elected Vice President and assumed the presidency when James Garfield became the second American president to be assassinated. By the time Arthur became president, the Reconstruction Era had been over for five years. As a result the remnants of the leadership of the Confederate States of America rose again wearing the uniform of Democrats. The supporters of the Republicans were mostly former slaves and the Democrats immediately and successfully disenfranchised them for almost a hundred years.

Given the weakness of the southern Republicans President Arthur sought to build a coalition with the Readjuster Party, a short-lived political movement that pursued a progressive agenda in the South, including the funding education for blacks and whites along with the abolition of the poll tax and the whipping post. For a time the Readjuster Party was seen as being the political vehicle that could provide blacks in the South some level of protection and support and Arthur's support was important. However, the platform of the Readjusters was not sustainable in the South and it disappeared.

To make matters worse for black Americans, in 1883 the Supreme Court of the United States declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. President Arthur expressed his disapproval of this court decision but was unable to get Congress to pass any laws in response to the Supreme Court's decision and it would be 89 years before civil rights for black Americans would be anything close to being the law of the land.

Perhaps President Arthur's most notable act regarding race was to overturn the court martial of black West Point cadet Johnson Whitaker on the grounds that the case was illegal and based on racism. Arthur's actions were as remarkable as the reality of racism at West Point was unremarkable.

### **Woodrow Wilson**

Woodrow Wilson was the 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States and is best known for his progressive policies, his leadership of this country during World War I and his quixotic effort to found the League of Nations, the direct ancestor the United Nations. Wilson was a native of Virginia and president of Princeton University, acknowledged to be the most "southern" of the Ivy League schools.

Perhaps because of his southern heritage he made statements such as:

*"The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation – until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country."*

And in speaking to a delegation of black American leaders:

*"Segregation is not a humiliation but a benefit, and ought to be so regarded by you gentlemen."*

And also:

*"[Reconstruction government was detested] not because the Republican Party was dreaded but because the dominance of an ignorant and inferior race was justly dreaded."*

These are not the rantings for some Klansman with a burning cross in the background. These are the sober and measured words of the 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States who institutionalized racial segregation in the federal civil service through use of his executive power and hosted the premiere showing of the classic racist motion picture "Birth of a Nation" in the White House. What is known about President Wilson is that he was a committed and unapologetic racist who believed in white supremacy with all his heart.

### Conclusion

Forty other men have been inaugurated President of the United States and we would do well to understand their racial policies as part of our understanding of their presidencies and these United States. Clearly historians have either ignored or diminished the importance of this aspect of the national perception of the American presidency.

For many citizens of this country, white and black, American myth is clearly more comforting than American reality. But as this overview indicates, to this very day this nation honors slave owners and racists who actively and publicly sought to oppress and humiliate black Americans. The fact that they represented the times in which they live is but small comfort to black Americans today or to their ancestors who had to live through those times.

To those who would argue that these horrific events, actions and rhetoric belong to the past, the response must be that until this unholy American past is recognized and denounced, there can be no possibility of real progress in the present or institutional and cultural change in the future. The first step to recovery is always the recognition of the problem. True American history can teach us a lot. Revisionist and mythical history blinds us to the truth and binds us to a reality that is neither desirable nor sustainable.

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