

Is America racist? Its history and institutions say yes

By Noel A. Cazenave=Special to The Hartford Courant

There is ample evidence to demonstrate what to many people of African descent and other people of color is an obvious fact of life:

America is racist to its core. This fact is evident when one examines the nation's historical foundation and legacy; its white supremacist beliefs; and the organization and operation of its social institutions.

Contemporary white racist attitudes and practices are built upon this nation's legacy of past white-racist views and actions. For example, understanding current land disputes and sovereignty-rights conflicts involving American Indians requires knowledge of federal government policies of forced removal or genocide, which drove American Indians from their land to reservations. All but a tiny percentage of their land was taken from them, and the U.S. government broke many, if not most, of the treaties it made with American Indians.

Knowledge of history also is needed to appreciate fully why many Latinos migrate to the United States in search of economic opportunity. For example, urged on by the popular doctrine of the Manifest Destiny of the "white race," much of what was Mexico was taken by the United States by military force. That land now includes all or parts of seven states. Among those states is natural-resources-rich California, where, ironically, not long ago voters approved a proposition to stem the immigration of Mexicans.

To understand why relatively few people of Asian descent live in the United States, and why Asian Americans often are viewed as foreigners in their own country, we must remember that Asians were excluded from

coming to the United States by immigration laws that specifically barred them. Racist immigration quotas against Asians continued until the mid-1960s. Consistent with this legacy of hostility toward Asians, in recent years Asian Americans increasingly have been the targets of racist violence.

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Key to this historical legacy are white supremacist values and ideologies that often manifest themselves in white racist stereotypes.

In his book "American Society," sociologist Robin Williams identifies "group superiority themes" as one of 15 core American values. This includes the assumption of "racial" group superiority.

The superior evaluation of "whiteness" is evident to anyone who reads the definitions of white and black in any standard dictionary. It becomes clear that these terms refer to much more than benign racial designations. The following are some of the values my dictionary assigns to these supposedly value-neutral race/colors.

White is "auspicious, fortunate," "morally pure; innocent" and "lacking malice; harmless; white magic."

Black, of course, is the opposite. Black is "marked by disaster or misfortune," "gloomy, pessimistic; dismal; a black future," "harmful, evil, or wicked; a black heart." Black also is "soiled or stained with dirt," "sullen or hostile" and "indicating censure, disgrace, etc.: a black mark on one's record."

Is it any wonder that surveys consistently show the acceptance of racist stereotypes about people of color? Black Americans commonly are seen as lazy in comparison to European Americans; violent; less intelligent

than other racial groups; and people who prefer to live off welfare. Similar stereotypes are widely held to a lesser degree for people of Latino descent. Moreover, both Latino Americans and Asian Americans, who often are assumed to be non-Americans, are thought to be less patriotic.

These stereotypes are key building blocks in the ideological justification of white supremacist beliefs and practices.

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White racism affects societal judgments about appropriate sexual and marriage partners. It often determines where blacks and other people of color are allowed to live, and consequently what schools their children attend. White racism affects whether they are encouraged or discouraged in their college aspirations and the availability, nature and quality of their employment. It also impacts how they are treated by the police and the rest of the criminal justice system. White racism affects their treatment in retail stores, how much they pay for automobiles and houses, who they know, their overall quality of life, their health and, ultimately, their life expectancy.

In brief, white racism is a systemic problem, not a problem of a few racial bigots. Since white racism is a core feature of the organization and evolution of American society, it will persist unless society is changed in a fundamental way. Its eradication requires systemic solutions that fundamentally challenge both "white" racial identity and privilege.

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Only those who revel in victimhood call America racist

By Laurence D. Cohen=(c) 1998, The Hartford Courant

To theorize that America is inherently racist may be fashionable among university scholars who revel in victimhood, but the shabby generalization does no favors to those of us who value clarity and logic and common sense.

To toss around the term "racism" as a description for a nation (or even as a description for the white majority within the nation) represents shabby scholarship, sloppy vocabulary and a thesis that depends on anecdotes for evidence.

Is the white migration to the suburbs "racism"? Blacks are moving to the suburbs at an even faster rate. Is opposition to racial quotas "racism"? A growing number of blacks view arbitrary quotas as an assault on their own talent and skills. Is every white cop who smacks around a black citizen a "racist"? What do we call it when a cop smacks around a drunk French Canadian drywaller who gets hostile on a Saturday night?

"Racism" brings with it all sorts of ideological baggage and a hodgepodge of speculation about human interaction that can find safe haven only in the friendly confines of university black studies or sociology departments.

Is there value to recognizing and studying the friction (real and imagined) between black and white in America? Of course there is. But to be consumed by it, to amplify every racial slight, distracts minorities from the sad reality that lousy public schools, destructive welfare programs and dismal public housing are products of their friends, not their enemies.

To mull why the French abuse the Algerians, to study the historic inequities

between the elite and the lower classes in England, to consider the nature of the tribal warfare with which Africa has been afflicted, to make sense of whatever curse afflicted the Turks and Armenians: These and dozens of other examples of social, economic and political discord are as interesting and angst-ridden as white-

ive abuses to which blacks were subjected now relegated to documentaries about Martin Luther King Jr., blacks now are liberated by a culture that responds to financial reward and suspicion of government social engineering.

Economist Jeremy Bentham, a 19th-century odd duck of a philosopher, had an interesting notion about human relations that deserves to be heard in our era of suspicion. "If we would understand one another, we must make use of some common measure. The only common measure the nature of things affords is money. ... Those who are not satisfied with the accuracy of this instrument must find out some other that shall be more accurate."

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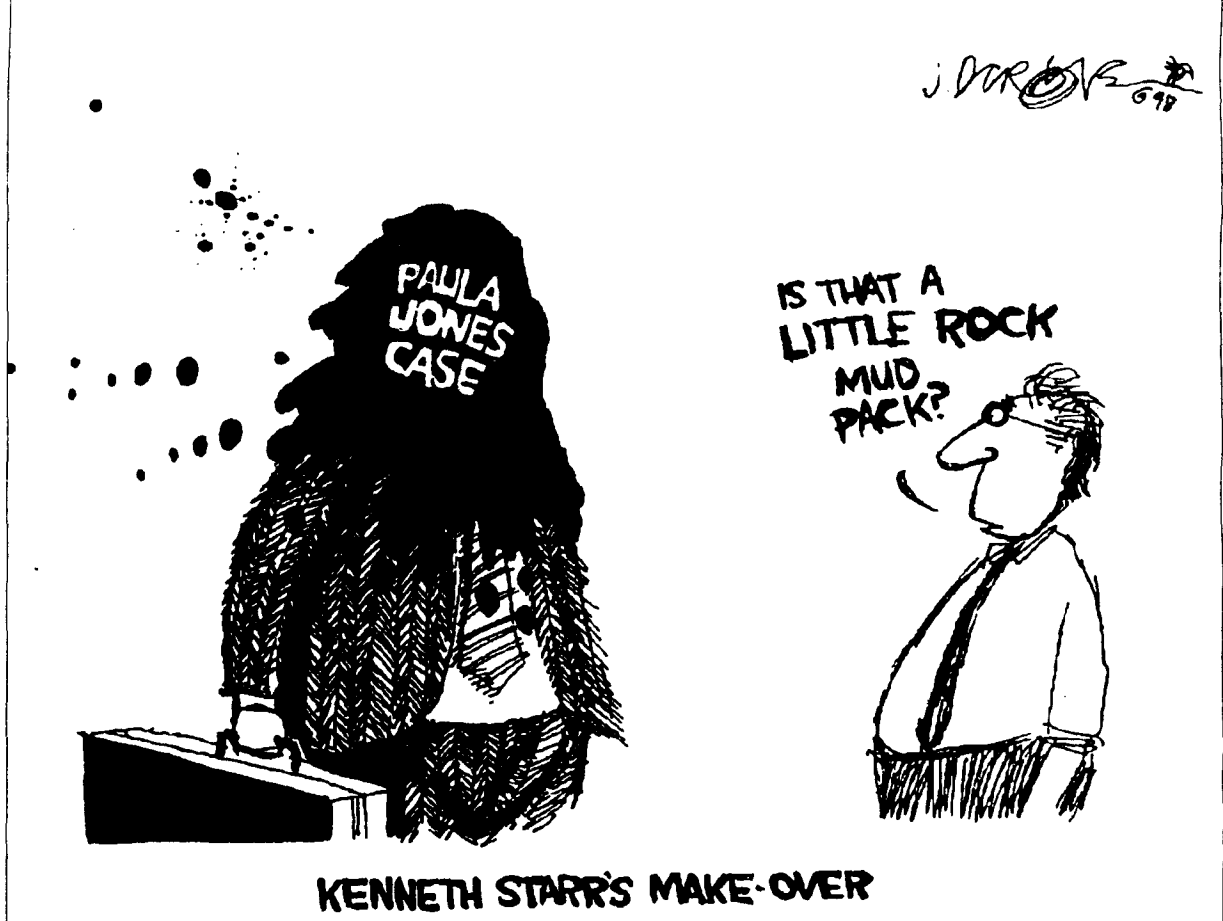
black friction in America.

Virtually every religious and ethnic minority in America has a sad tale to tell on the way to the great melting pot (a much-scorned metaphor today despite the fact that most Americans, and immigrants to America, embrace it still).

Do blacks have a special claim on our national conscience? They were enslaved; freed; limited in that freedom; lynched, burned and bombed; discouraged from exercising their franchise; and run away from even as integration became the law of the land. It is a history lesson that is important to learn.

But at what point do the victims fall victim to history? At what point do we cling to the peculiar comfort that offers us the refuge, the sympathy, that comes from victimhood? To be sure, it is the conceit of the self-satisfied to suggest that blacks "get over it" and move on. But said a bit more graciously and carefully, the culture of America today screams out at us all to get over it (whatever indignity "it" may be) and move on, with the freedom to prosper, whether or not we are loved.

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