

## **Why Are We Here? What Might We Do About It? Changing Our Nation's Consciousness on Racism**

The events over the last few weeks may be creating another watershed opportunity for our country, an opportunity for a significant change in our nation's consciousness, an opportunity to bring about real change.

### **It has happened successfully before.**

- With the birth of our nation, we saw frustrated revolutionaries unite to literally “fight” for independence.
- We saw it happen with the activities that culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
- We saw it happen when a mother, fed up with the tragic death of her child at the hands of a drunk driver, created a movement based on Mothers Against Drunk Drivers to change the nation's beliefs and behaviors around drinking and driving.

### **We can change.**

Yet more recently, far too many of these potential watershed moments are followed by a retreat to business as usual. How many times have we heard the cry, “How many more children have to die before we make real change to our gun laws?” or “How many more Black lives have to be lost needlessly at the hands of law enforcement before something is done?”

### **How many more?**

I've been asked many times over the past weeks about my thoughts on what we are seeing in America. More recently I have had the opportunity to facilitate a half day discussion on this issue with 20 leaders from diverse backgrounds within a major community impact organization. The issues we are facing are surmountable. But it starts with facing the issues, calling it out, being clear on where it comes from. Then it takes a will for change, a vision of change, a way to change, and an unflinching, unyielding, uncompromising, ever present commitment to change.

So, let's start by responding to a series of questions.

### ***Why are Black people so angry?***

- First, let's quit with the generalizations. Many Black people are angry, not all. And I can't speak for all Black people. So, take everything I say as me speaking for me, and only me...but informed by my experiences and conversations with friends, family, and associates about their experiences.

- 
- I believe many of us are angry because, like the revolutionaries that founded our country, we see that the deck is stacked against us. We see flagrant unfair treatment, we see lives lost, we see dreams crushed, over and over and over again.
  - And worse, very little seems to change. We kick and scream, and yet when the moment is over...yet another senseless death.
  - We see people on our streets protesting and some rioting, much like our country's White forefathers who, in 1773, dumped tea off British ships from their frustrations. They probably were called the equivalent of "domestic terrorists", yet today we recognize from their collective actions a new way was born.
  - While I don't condone rioting, I recognize from where it comes.

---

*If you find that your focus and your discussion and your first thought is on stopping the rioting, you are badly missing the point, much like the British did in 1773.*

---

### **Why "Black" lives matter? Shouldn't it be "all" lives matter?**

- Of course, "all" lives matter. But I believe behind this question lies perhaps an unintentional ignorance.
- Do you remember when, in the 2008 presidential campaign, people would say about Barak Obama, "He is a great candidate. He is so articulate..."? To many people, this will sound like an innocent compliment. But, *articulate*? Really? A Black man should run for president because he is so articulate? Many Black people understand that the comment was meant as a well-intentioned compliment. But think about it...Can you imagine someone saying something like that about a White candidate? "Joe Biden is a great candidate. He is so articulate." The statement is as naively racist as someone saying, "She is a great candidate; she is so attractive," may be considered naively sexist. But naiveté is not an excuse for not seeing. It's time to open some eyes.
- In the same way, when people ask you to help end breast cancer by being part of the *Race for the Cure*, do you say, "You should be racing for all cures, not just breast cancer"? Or when you are asked to participate in the *Hunger Walk*, do you say, "You shouldn't be walking for just hunger"?
- Of course, not. These are causes attempting to bring about specific change. You don't question their focus. So why do some question the noble cause of saving Black lives?

---

*What does it say about the way our thinking has been influenced that the thought of doing something specifically to save Black lives is questioned while the thought of doing something to specifically save people suffering from cancer isn't?*

---

- What does it say about the questioner? There is nothing wrong with asking questions, but we must be willing to examine the question, because sometimes the question itself can help the questioners see their own bias. Naïve racism can be very subtle.



---

***But aren't things equal now? Isn't there equal opportunity now?***

- Some may *intellectually* believe things are equal today, but I believe even most in this group *emotionally* know the truth. Jane Elliott, famous for her blue-eye/brown-eye social experiments, asked an audience of predominately White people a very difficult question. Check out this [60-second extract](#).



- I would feel very confident in saying if she were to ask an audience of predominately Black people to stand if they would be happy to be treated in general the way our society in general treats our White citizens in this country, there would be few Black people sitting. However, reverse this question for a predominately White audience, you see the result. So, let's agree that at least emotionally we know that equality in today's society is a myth. You can feel it.
- But, let's also be clear. Many strides have been made. Many barriers have been removed, many walls have been broken down, many unfounded beliefs have been uprooted. We have come a long way. But, let's not fool ourselves either. There is much, much work to do.
- Jane Elliott's question can serve as an indicator of where we are. When that question can be asked and there be about the same number sitting as standing, that will speak volumes. However, today, we are not even close.

***Why all this talk about White privilege? Are you trying to make White people living today feel guilty about what White people did in the past?***

- First, let's never feel guilty about the past. Reflect on it, feel remorse about it, make amends for it, learn from it, but let's not guilt trip ourselves about it. Guilt robs us of the ability to give all to the now. Let's not expend our mental and emotional resources where there is no value.
- But there is value in understanding this thing that has been labeled "White privilege." Here's a coach providing a simple illustration for his students based on a [race for \\$100](#) (3.5 minutes).



- In this race, each of eight statements to which a student could give a positive response moved the student 2 steps ahead of the pack...*before the race started*. As a result, there were many still at the starting line, and many already half-way to the finish line. He concludes with a couple of very important points.



- 
- “Every statement I made has nothing to do with anything any of you have done, nothing to do with decisions you made... We would be foolish not to realize we have been given more opportunity.”
  - “The reality is that if this were a fair race and *everyone* was back on that line, I guarantee you that some of these Black dudes [back at the starting line] would smoke all of you. It’s only because you have this big of a head start that you are possibly going to win this race called life.”

---

*Don’t feel guilty about the privilege you have been given. Instead, recognize the privilege, reach back to help those who didn’t have it, and seek to change the conditions that cause the privilege in the first place.*

---

### **How did we get here? And what does White privilege have to do with a police officer killing an unarmed Black man by putting his knee on his neck?**

- The answer to both questions is the same: **systemic racism**.
- Ruth Marcus, in quoting Radley Balko, [describes it this way](#), “To declare the system racist is not to brand those who participate in it as intentionally, repugnantly, guilty of prejudice. It is to say that ‘we have systems and institutions that produce racially disparate outcomes, regardless of the intentions of the people who work within them.’”
- How is our system racist? Here is a not-so-quick history lesson courtesy of Sheena Wright, President and CEO, United Way of New York City and [National Geographic](#).

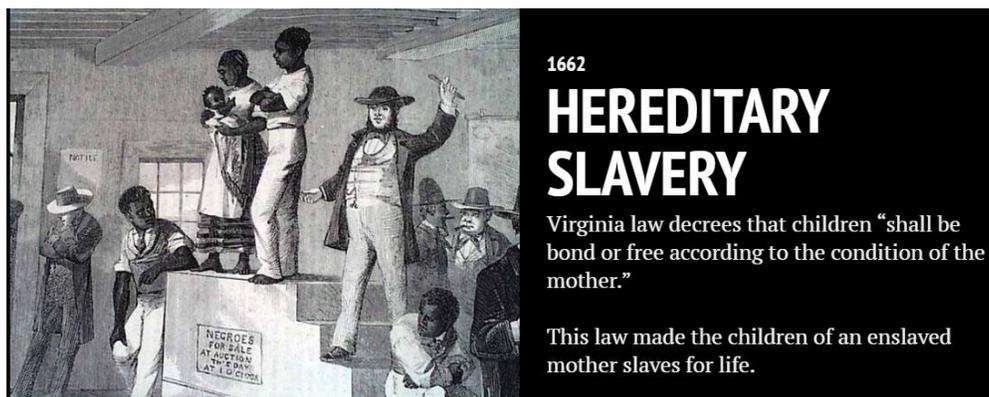
### **Example 1. Systemic Racism: Slavery**

- During the adolescence days of our nation, we (the collective “we”) made decision, after decision, after decision, to promote a concept that Black people were not people or, at best, an inferior race.

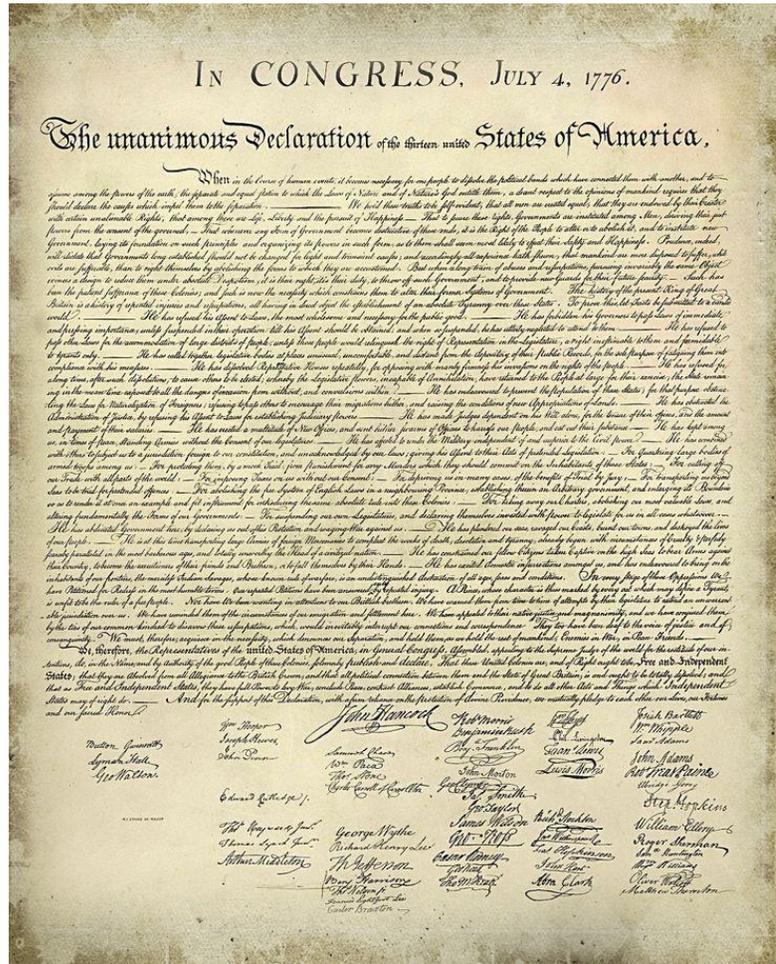
---

*No nation in known history up to that time had dehumanized another people. So why did we do it? We had to.*

---



- Our Declaration of Independence reads: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”
- Yet we relied on slaves to fuel major parts of our economy, so if we put forth as our justification for independence that all men are created equal, how do we justify slavery? We do it by putting forth the brilliant idea that Black people aren't really people. They are property.
- Prior to 1662, a child's status was based on the status of the birth father. In 1662, Virginia was the first state to change the birth right law decreeing that children should be bond or free according to the condition of the mother. What a tool for ensuring propagation of slavery and to facilitate White men abusing female slaves for gain.
- In 1787, a constitutional amendment, for census purposes, counted Black people as 3/5ths of a person.
- In 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court decreed through the Dred Scott Decision, that all people of African descent, free or slave, were not United States citizens and therefore had no right to sue in federal court. In addition, the Court asserted that the Fifth Amendment protected slave owner rights because slaves were their legal property.
- Following the end of the Civil War in 1865, the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution was added: *Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.*
- The abolition of slavery, however, didn't change the consciousness of a race who benefitted from slavery. Mob violence and lynchings followed. Despite multiple attempts to pass anti-lynching legislation starting in 1900, and then again in 1918, 1922, and 1934, southern senators blocked the bill's passing. **It wasn't until 2018 that the U.S. senate passed a federal bill, and not until Feb 26, 2020 that the house passed one!**



# BLACK LIVES MATTER

By Sheena Wright, President & CEO, United Way of New York City



If you are wondering why we say “Black Lives Matter”—it is because we live in a country that has declared that they don’t.

In 1787 the United States Constitution declared that enslaved people of African descent would be counted as “three-fifths” of a person.

## **BLACK LIVES MATTER.**

In 1857 The Supreme Court in the Dredd Scott decision declared that Black people in the United States “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”

From 1877 until 1965 thousands of Jim Crow laws across the country declared that Black people were not fit to: ride on public transportation, go to public schools, eat at restaurants, drink from water fountains, serve in the military, go to parks, work in the federal government, or live in neighborhoods—alongside whites. The express purpose of Jim Crow laws was to promulgate and enforce white supremacy and to subjugate Black people.

## **BLACK LIVES MATTER.**

Between 1882 and 1968 there were 4,743 known Lynchings in the United States. Most of the people were hanged or shot and many were burned at the stake, castrated, beaten with clubs or dismembered.

During peaceful nonviolent protests during the Civil Rights Movement Black men, women and children were brazenly attacked by vicious dogs, high powered fire hoses, teargas and beaten bloody by law enforcement officials.

## **BLACK LIVES MATTER.**

From the 1930s to the 1970s Blacks were legally excluded from homeownership—the biggest creator of wealth in the United States of America—by the Federal Housing Administration.

Between 1932 and 1972 the United States Public Health Service made hundreds of Black men in Tuskegee suffer from blindness, and heart, brain and organ deterioration and failure, so they can watch the devastating impact of syphilis left untreated—even when the United States Public Health Service knew penicillin was the cure. This was done without the knowledge or consent of these men.

## **BLACK LIVES MATTER.**

Black and Brown communities have been fighting for the right to a “sound basic education” for their children for decades; and while the highest state courts in many states – including New York, Connecticut and most recently in April of 2020, Michigan – have declared that discriminatory actions and practices of those States did indeed violate the state constitutional rights of those children and their families, the United States Supreme court’s current ruling in the San Antonio Independent School District case states that the right to be educated is not a right that is protected by the US Constitution.

## **BLACK LIVES MATTER.**

A 2018 study showed that Black boys and men in the United States with comparable education and backgrounds still earned substantially less 99 percent of the time than white boys and men.

A 2019 Rutgers University study revealed that between 2013 and 2018 getting killed by the police was a leading cause of death for Black boys and men in America.



---

## Example 2. Systemic Racism: The GI Bill

- Though slavery was abolished 150 years ago, **my point is that little was done to change the consciousness that created it.**

---

*What you do is a direct result of what you think. As a result, if we don't change the thinking of a nation, if we don't change our consciousness—that is, the way we see and think about things—the behaviors will persist, just in a different form.*

---

- Let's fast forward now to 1944 when the GI bill was passed. This was sweeping legislation intended to prevent another depression like 1929. According to Defense.gov the bill has had [transformational impact](#) over the last 75 years.
  - Within its first seven years of use, about 8 million veterans took advantage. U.S. college and university degree-holders more than doubled between 1940 and 1950.
  - By 1955, 4.3 million home loans worth \$33 billion had been granted to veterans, who were responsible for buying 20 percent of all new homes built after the war.
  - By July 1956, almost half of the 16 million World War II vets had gotten education or training through the GI Bill.
  - The GI Bill was extended several times, helping 10.3 million more veterans after the Korean and Vietnam wars. In 2008, a version known as the Post 9/11 GI Bill passed Congress, and more recently, the Forever GI Bill expanded benefits for vets.
  - In 1990, President George H.W. Bush summed up the impact of the bill by saying, “the GI Bill changed the lives of millions by replacing old roadblocks with paths of opportunity.”
- But hold-up...surely ALL veterans benefit equally from this wide sweeping legislation, right? **Unfortunately, systemic racism reared its ugly head in the [GI bill](#).**
  - While the GI Bill's language did not specifically exclude African-American veterans from its benefits, it was structured in a way that ultimately shut doors for 1.2 million Black veterans.
  - To make sure the GI Bill largely benefited White people, southern Democrats drew on tactics they had previously used to ensure that the [New Deal helped as few Black people as possible](#). They insisted on policies that would give preferential treatment to White GIs.
  - Blacks were discouraged and, in some cases, prohibited from purchasing homes in affluent, growing communities, but instead they were limited to purchasing homes in declining communities.
  - Fast forward 50 years, and think about the economic divide that creates for a White son born in the 1950s who inherits a home purchased for \$20K that appreciates 4% a year, versus a Black son who's GI father's home purchased for \$20K in an inferior neighborhood that appreciates, at best, 1% a year...\$142K, versus \$33K, a four-fold difference, just caused by housing policies.



- 
- Then, let's add the education difference, where Black GIs couldn't get into programs for higher paying professions because those slots went first to White GIs.
  - Then add what happened to their children, now that the Black GIs are in poorer neighborhoods. Recall that public schools are funded by the local tax base. If the tax base is poorer, we now have the children of Black GIs receiving a worse education because of where they live based on policies that prevented them from living in better places.
  - Compound these changes and how could the result NOT be what we have today, a vast racial difference in starting points in a large part due to systemic racism. According to the U.S. Census, the median income in 2017 for Black households was \$40,258, but for White households \$68,145, higher by a staggering 69%.

### Example 3. Systemic Racism: White Fear

- Most people would likely agree, that if I kill you in self-defense, than I should be immune from prosecution and punishment. And state laws generally agree with this. However, did you know, that among other things, that if I have a **“reasonable belief”** that force is necessary, and a **“reasonable belief”** that an attack is imminent, then I can kill you in [self-defense](#)? So, if I am a White man, and I see a Black man coming toward me, and I am feeling fear and I can convince a mostly White jury of my peers...and sometimes an all-White jury...that they would feel fear also and therefore it is reasonable to feel fear, then I can kill you and be immune from punishment.
- And if I am a White prosecutor, and I would feel fear, I am more likely not to prosecute the White man, and if I am a White judge, and I would feel fear, I am more likely to approve a plea deal with very little punishment for the White man.
- This is perhaps why:
  - [A study](#) of nearly 100 million traffic stops by police departments nationwide found that Black drivers were far more likely to be pulled over than White drivers. Meanwhile, Black and Hispanic drivers “were searched about twice as often as stopped White drivers”— even though Black and, to an even greater extent, Hispanic drivers were less likely than Whites to be found with drugs.
  - [One study](#) showed that White defendants were 25 percent more likely than their Black counterparts to have criminal charges dropped or reduced to less serious crimes.
  - African Americans are [incarcerated at more than 5 times](#) the rate of Whites.
  - African Americans and Whites use drugs at similar rates, but the [imprisonment rate](#) of African Americans for drug charges is almost 6 times that of Whites.
  - [Another study showed](#) that Blacks receive sentences that are almost 10 percent longer than those of comparable Whites arrested for the same crimes.
  - A [national study](#) showed that though Black Americans account for just 13 percent of the population, among unarmed victims, more than 33 percent of those fatally shot by police were Black.



- 
- [Finally](#), Black men were about 2.5 more likely than White men to be killed by police.

---

*How can we expect a change in these outcomes if we haven't addressed the underlying fear that is causing them?*

---

- I believe this is why a Black teenager can be killed by a White man who sees himself as neighborhood policing, *and be cleared*, or a White father and son could kill a Black teenage runner and not initially be arrested, or a Black EMT could be killed in her own home, or a White officer could justify in his own mind putting his knee on a Black man's neck and the prosecutor could initially be negotiating a plea deal with him.
- In this 19-minute Ted talk, [Megan Ming Francis](#) cites the relationship between fear and racism. You would think she was talking about the protests and riots of today. She did the talk four years ago, during the racial tensions in Ferguson.

### ***Isn't it enough not to be racist?***

- Unfortunately, not being racist doesn't even come close. First, we ALL have our unintentional or unconscious biases, and most of them we probably aren't aware of. (Remember, "He's so articulate?")
- But more importantly, how much does the Catholic Church today wish that they had spoken out more quickly against Nazism or taken action more quickly against child molesters in the priesthood? Silence makes you complicit.

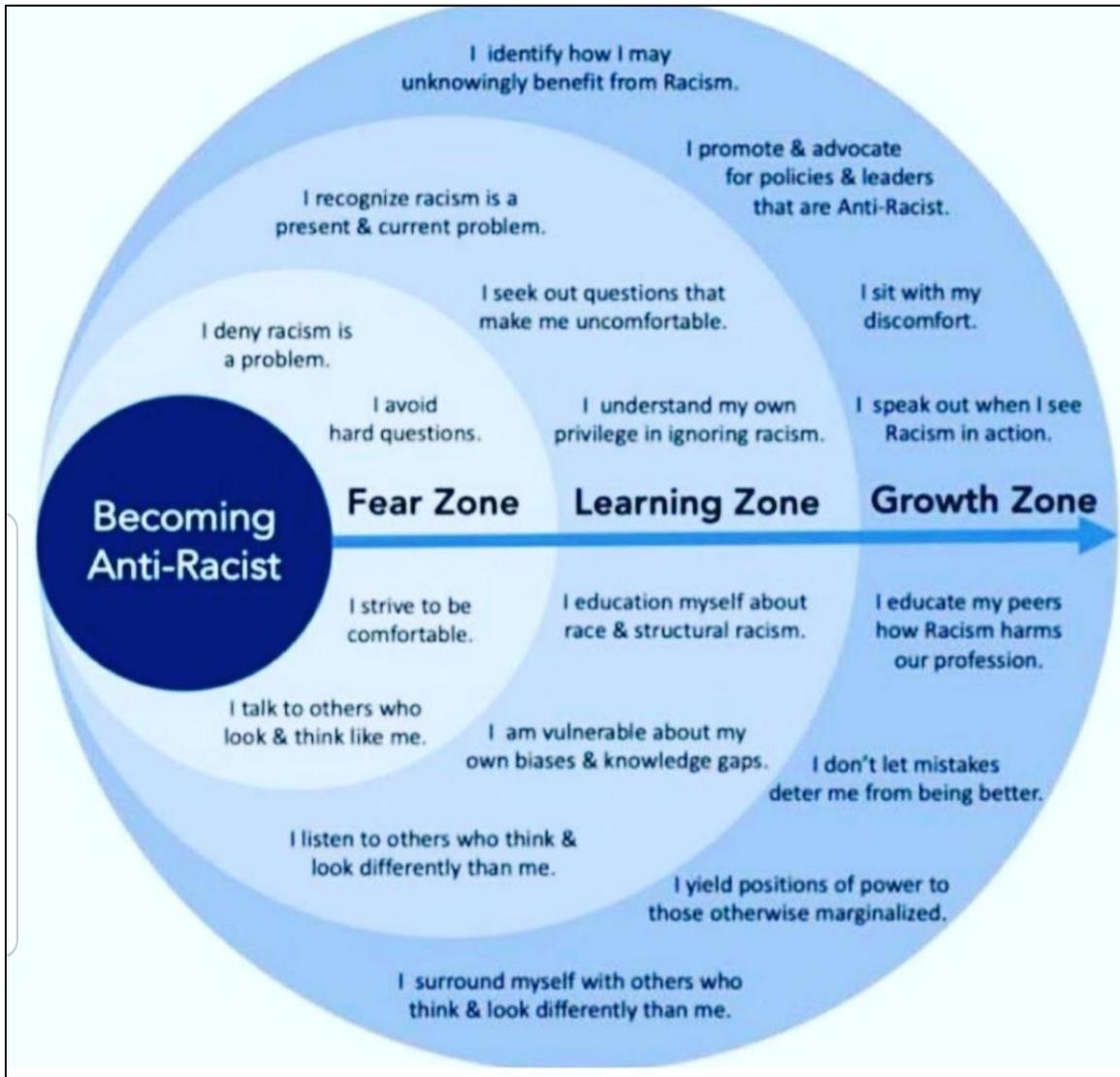
---

*"There comes a time when **silence** is betrayal. Our lives begin to end the day we become **silent** about things that matter. In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the **silence** of our friends." – Martin Luther King*

---

- We must be [anti-racist](#). We must be willing to fight against racism. Being antiracist results from a conscious decision to make frequent, consistent, equitable choices daily. These choices require ongoing self-awareness and self-reflection as we move through life. If we are not consciously making antiracist choices, we likely are unconsciously upholding aspects of White privilege and systemic racism. Being racist or antiracist is not about who you are; it is about what you do.





### What Might We Do?

If you have a chance, and you haven't already, it might be worth the 2-hour investment to view the two-part special, ["Where do we go from here?"](#) Oprah Winfrey hosts what I believe is an insightful conversation with ten Black thought leaders from various fields, including politics, religion, academia, and the arts. Among their comments:

- Both Stacy Abrams, former candidate for Georgia governor, and Keisha Lance Bottoms, Mayor City of Atlanta, underscore the critical importance of the 2020 vote to change district attorneys, state and federal legislatures, and the presidency. They also emphasize the importance of the 2020 census which will impact funding for the next decade. **I agree.**
- Jennifer Eberhardt, Professor Dept Psychology Stanford, argues that the goal isn't "color blind." Color blind means you don't see color, but this also means you don't see discrimination, and you don't see the different treatment. Color blind promotes not seeing and not addressing the systemic issues. **I agree.**
- Ibram X. Kendi, author of several books including *How to be an Antiracist*, explains that some people think the problem is Black people. Others believe that



---

the problem is power and policies. These two beliefs will lead to different behaviors. **I agree.**

---

*If you think the problem is Black people, that there is something wrong with them, that they are somehow inferior, unmotivated, and therefore deserving of their outcomes, you are NOT going to see problems with unequal outcomes. You will see “high performing” Black people as proof that the problem IS NOT with the system. You are not going to see systemic racism. Instead you are going to look for solutions that weed out all “those” bad people, solutions that keep them away from you, solutions that segregate and imprison.*

---

What might you do as an [individual](#)? Check out these 75 things...choose 1 or 2 or 75! Though the list was created for White people...I believe the activities are universal.

### **What additionally do I believe we should be doing as a country?**

- As much as I disagree with many of the policies of the Republican Party, I believe the [Contract with America](#) in 1994 was a brilliant strategy for catalyzing and creating a movement for change. Through the contract, the Republican Party promised on their first day of majority in the House to bring up for vote eight major reforms. I believe the contract was single-handedly more responsible than anything else in the Republican Party gaining 54 house seats and 9 senate seats in that election.
- In the same way, I call on our Black leadership, the NAACP, Black Lives Matter, the Congressional Black Congress and others, to come together to build a similar **Contract for a New America**.
- This Contract would be ... and this is important... a series of specific actions or policy changes – NOT outcomes.
  - “A fair education for every child” is an outcome...interesting, valuable, goal-oriented, but NOT action-oriented.
  - I am referring to such things as, “Decrease funding by 25% to any city that doesn’t have ABC” or “Pass federal legislation that requires XYZ.” These are specific actions and policy changes.
- The Contract for a New America would be widely published and we would ask political candidates at every level of government to align with or against the Contract for a New America. This alignment would be a catalyst for the 2020 election.
- I personally think the focus on defunding police misses the point. While it is indeed an action, I see it as a band-aid on a band-aid. Yes, let’s transfer more funds to where they are needed to support the community and educate. However, public safety is a necessary community service. Let’s not “throw out the baby with the bathwater.”



- 
- While the contents of the Contract for a New America must focus on activities to change the system, it must also focus on changing our thinking, lest, like in the 1940s, the racist beliefs just come back in a different form.
  - How do we change thinking? I remember in the '90s, while watching *Friends*, hearing for the first time on television someone say, "I'm the designated driver" and wondering, "What is that?" and then thinking later, "What a great idea." This is an example of how media was used to begin changing the thinking of our nation. And Mothers Against Drunk Drivers was able to achieve this kind of mainstream attention in less than 15 years.
  - It's time we begin seeing in our popular media today actions people are taking every day to counter systemic racism. We must see every day people doing everyday things to actively change their behavior and change our system. Imagine an episode of your favorite drama where the lead character says to his/her co-workers, "Come join me for our block party celebrating our state giving voting rights back to people who have served their time in prison," or people wearing badges representing "anti-racist" day, or dozens of sit-coms where writers use their characters in comical situations calling out White privilege in action.

Change our thinking, change our world. We can do it.

Michael

*Michael Wilkinson is the Managing Director of [Leadership Strategies](#) – The Facilitation Company, the largest provider of professional facilitators and facilitation training in the country. As an international leader in the facilitation industry, Michael is both a Certified Master Facilitator and a Certified Professional Facilitator. He is the creator of the [FindaFacilitator.com](#) database, a board member of the International Institute of Facilitation, and an inductee in the International Facilitation Hall of Fame. Michael has written six books on facilitation, including [The Secrets of Facilitation](#), [The Executive Guide to Facilitating Strategy](#), [The 8 Core Practices of Facilitative Leaders](#) and [CLICK: The Virtual Meetings Book](#).*

*The views expressed in this position paper are his alone and do not represent the views of Leadership Strategies, Inc., its board, staff, or affiliates.*

**Leadership  
Strategies**   
Level up.  
[www.leadstrat.com](http://www.leadstrat.com)

