

SLAVERY



CASTING SHADOWS FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

By **DyNAMIC** Advisory Board Chair, Lee Bennett Esq.



Slavery was finally abolished in America in 1865, but does this painful and uncomfortable part of America's past still cast long shadows into the present that have an ever-lasting effect on race relations? Are there people in American society who still believe that a person is inferior and can be defined based, solely, on the color of their skin? Do people opportunistically take advantage of racial differences in society in order to advance their own interests?

The frequency and number of racial incidents in America, including the shootings of black males by police, the burning down of black churches, and the disenfranchisement of sections of poor black people in the USA, causes shock and astonishment here in Europe. It leaves a very clear impression that there are serious problems with race relations. The statistics reveal an unpleasant truth: non-white America doesn't appear to be receiving their fair share of the American pie.

There are 500 billionaires in the USA of which only two are black (Oprah Winfrey and Michael

Jordan), and there are only five black CEO's in the 500 biggest companies. Seventy five percent of white Americans have only white friends. Thirty seven percent of male prison inmates are black. Only 9.8% of blacks, over 25 years of age, have completed a bachelor's degree, compared with



14.4% of whites. Black people are more than twice as likely as other races to be killed by the police. So it goes, on and on.

Although I spend most of my time in London, England, I was born and raised in a city in the southwest of England called Bristol, which is located on the River Avon and has been an important location for marine

trade for centuries. The city is famed for its beauty and quality of life. In 2014, Bristol was named as the best city in the UK to live in by the Sunday Times' Best Places to Live in Britain award.

There is a clear link between the city where I was born and America. Much of what is beautiful and grand about Bristol was built on something terribly cruel and shameful: the slave trade. From 1698 onwards, as a leading slave port, Bristol played

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The Bristol ships would sail to Africa and trade for enslaved Africans. They would then sail to the plantations in America and the Caribbean where they would sell their slaves and then return to Bristol with their tobacco, rum, and sugar, which had been produced by the slaves on the plantations.

Between 1697 and 1807 at least 2,108 ships left Bristol to make the trip to Africa and then across the Atlantic with slaves. Over 500,000 souls were enslaved and transported by these ships, representing around one-fifth of the British slave trade during this time. Britain transported over three million African people into slavery. It is estimated that around half of the slaves died during transit to America, due to the appalling conditions and overcrowding.

As a young boy at school, we were not taught about Bristol’s shameful past. I did not know that many of Bristol’s landmarks reflected its involvement in slavery.

As I walked around the very grand Queen’s Square I did not know that it had been home to many wealthy slave traders and was the place where Bristol’s Mayor Nathaniel Day had petitioned against a tax on slaves;



nor did I know that the courtyard, where the Merchant Venturers Almshouse is located, can be traced back to the pro-slavery lobby.

As a young man, when I was clerking for Judges in Bristol, my office was based in an area called Lewin’s Mead, which is very near a building called The Sugar House, which is now a hotel. I had no idea that this building was formerly one of the many refineries that processed the sugar that had been harvested by slaves in the Caribbean.

Colston Hall is a major concert venue in Bristol and a place where I have attended many

concerts. I also performed there as a teenager in a gala youth performance. I did not know that this concert hall, as well as several schools in Bristol, was named after Edward Colston, a wealthy Member of Parliament, merchant, and slave trader.

A statue of Edward Colston sits in the city center with an inscription that reads, “Erected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city.” As a school kid I was not taught about the Colston family making their wealth from the evil slave trade. I did not know that Edward Colston was deputy governor of the Royal African Company or that his brother, Thomas Colston, supplied the glass beads that were used to buy the slaves.

Edward Colston put much money into schools and alms houses in Bristol. My niece attended Colston’s Girls’ School in Bristol, before moving on to St. Mary Redcliffe’s to continue her studies. It was in 1791 that the bells of St. Mary Redcliffe’s church rung out victoriously when William Wilberforce’s bill to abolish slavery was defeated.

All around the city there are monuments dedicated to Bristol’s important citizens; monuments built with the wealth that flowed from slavery.

The Slavery Abolition Act freed 800,000 African slaves who had been kept as legal property by British owners. When abolition came, those who had participated received substantial compensation. In 1833, Parliament authorized £20m to former slave owners in Britain, equivalent to about £16 billion today. Slave owners and merchants in Bristol were given £829,205 in compensation after the Slavery Abolition Act

(approximately £71.1 million today). No compensation was provided to the former slaves who had suffered bondage and ill-treatment.

Another port city in England, called Liverpool, traded even more slaves than did Bristol. However, unlike Bristol, in 1994, Liverpool made a public apology for its shameful past. Liverpool is also home to the International Slavery Museum.

In 1996, a bridge was built in Bristol’s dockside area. The bridge is called Pero’s Bridge and is named after Pero Jones who was a slave brought to Bristol by John Pinney, a plantation owner in the Caribbean. Bristol is making a more concerted effort to acknowledge how its wealth was created by the slave trade. There has also been much debate about whether Bristol should apologize for the cruel trade that paid for so much that makes it such a beautiful city.

I do not believe for one moment that Bristol’s current citizens are to blame for what happened several hundred years ago. Nor do I believe that the current citizens of America should be blamed for what happened several generations back. However, it is important that everyone acknowledges and understand what happened in the past so as to move on and ensure it does not happen again. We study history partly as a means of ensuring that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. It is, therefore, crucial that we rebuke the sins of the past and the beliefs that lead to such inhuman practices; a belief that one race of people is inferior to another.

It is important to examine the undeniable problems that currently plague the USA in terms of race relations. Such problems do not exist in the UK and Europe to anywhere near the same extent as they do in America. Equality legislation and attitudes and behaviors are markedly different from those that

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exist in the U.S. One wonders why that is. Why are there such racial tensions in the USA? Why are there such serious incidents of discrimination? The UK has moved on from it’s painful past, but America does not appear to have done so.

I remember one of my trips to the USA about 22 years ago. I was parked in traffic and I noticed people were on the roadside collecting money from the drivers as they waited. As our car moved forward I could see that these collectors were in fact Ku Klux Klan members dressed in their ridiculous regalia. I could not believe what I saw. I could not understand how this could be allowed.

I have always believed that if a racist believes another person to be inferior simply because of their race, then that in itself demonstrates a lack of intelligence, good sense, and judgment on the part of the racist. It is the clearest evidence of inferiority, as it shows a shallowness of mind, a weakness, and insecurity based on an irrational fear. Racists betray humanity and all that is civilized and cultured. Racists are the true inferiors and, I suspect that, in their hearts they know it.

Of course the First Amendment in the U.S. Constitution grants the right of freedom of speech however unpopular that might be. In the UK, we don’t have such an all-encompassing right to freedom of speech. We do stop at inciting racial hatred.

In the UK, citizens have a guarantee of freedom of expression, which is contained in Article 10 of the Human Rights Act, which incorporated the European Convention into the domestic law of the UK. There are exceptions to this freedom, under the law, which prohibit racist speech targeted at individuals or prohibit speech of a racist or anti-religious nature. Under the law of



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the UK, "Incitement to racial hatred" was established as an offense under the Public Order Act 1986 and was first established as a criminal offence in the Race Relations Act 1976. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 made publication of material that incited racial hatred an arrest-able offense. This offense encompasses deliberately provoking hatred of a racial group, distributing racist material to the public, making inflammatory public speeches, creating racist websites on the Internet, and inciting inflammatory rumors about an individual or an ethnic group for the purpose of spreading racial discontent.

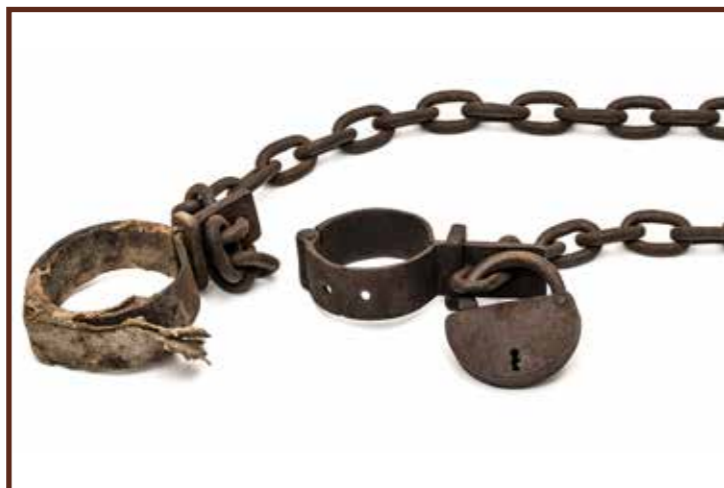
So, in the UK we don't take too kindly to thugs dressing up like clowns in robes with pointed hoods or Nazi-style fancy dress and inciting racial hatred in our communities.

I know that there will probably be gasps of horror from the ACLU and others at the mere mention of a limited and focused peeling back of First Amendment

freedoms of speech and expression. But, the reality is that freedom of speech can never be absolute and there has to be a line which must not be crossed. By imposing careful and sensible limitations on First Amendment rights when it comes to these kinds of poisonous groups who peddle their hatred, will not mean that a slippery slope into censorship and an erosion of free speech will follow. The evidence of the UK and Europe proves this to be so.

In the UK and Europe, we don't have the racial tensions and violence that exist in America. Nor do we have an erosion of free speech. We just know that there is a line you do not cross when it comes to freedom of speech and expression. It is a balancing act; the right to say and do certain things does not outweigh the right of people to live in peace and not be subject to hatred and the violence that flows from it.

Without the public expression of a wicked idea, let us say anti-Semitism, there is unlikely to be action that would follow. If people know that you can spew forth racist dogma that incites hatred, then it gives them the confidence and encouragement not only to repeat such vitriol, but more scarily, those ideas may decant into action. Without the Nazi's being able to peddle their propaganda on the streets and beer halls of Germany they would never have come to power. As long as people believe that some races are inferior and are allowed to espouse those views and/or decant them into reality, then there will never be a harmonious and equal society.



America is unwell and it must address its illness. If the root causes of these racial tensions are not discussed honestly and openly, then there will never be an equal society for all. As long as certain sections of American society share their racist views, whether on ideological grounds (believing that one race is superior to another) or for purely selfish ones (opportunistically taking

advantage of circumstances and blocking equal access to others), then there will always be an underclass of people for whom the American dream will always be just that; nothing more than a fantasy and never an achievable reality.

As long as America allows the KKK and other white supremacists to spread their hate, then there is never going to be an end to racial intolerance. Some views are so pernicious and insidious that they are an attack on the very foundation of a free and civilized society and therefore should be outlawed.

There is nothing magical about the Grand Wizards of the KKK or anything remotely "master race" about the angry, and often criminal, Neo-Nazis. The only thing these people demonstrate is that, somewhere along the line, they strayed from the path of evolution and stopped developing like other members of the human race.

Of course, there are those who are perhaps even more dangerous: those people who don't show themselves as the racists they are and who hide behind a thin veneer of reasonableness and respectability, seducing the electorate with a political message that is made to smell sweet but in reality is of the most pungent stench.

"As long as America has politicians like Republican Trent Franks of Arizona (and there are so many more I could quote) who can make statements like, "Far more of the African American community is being devastated by the policies of today than were being devastated by the policies of slavery," there will never be an America that has the maturity and honesty to deal with its racial problems. The rays of enlightenment will never cast out that long shadow of slavery that still pervades American society and which to this day still causes so many problems." Bennett

Will America truly be the land of the brave and do what is needed to end the racial tensions and inequality that exists? Or will people say that America has still not overcome? It was only less than half a century ago when black people were still marching and protesting for equal rights and Dr. Martin Luther King was murdered for the audacity

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of advocating such a thing as equal rights for all. Has America still not grown up as a genuinely fair and equal society? Is it still finding its way on this one important issue?

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DyNAMC Advisory Board Chair
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CEO & Founder, Potent Communications Ltd.

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DyNAMC Chair Lee Bennett has been appointed to the Board of Governors of the Corruption Amnesty Commission.

His company, Potent Communications Ltd, is also pleased to have been chosen from a list of national and international organizations by the Commission to lead its Communications strategy.

The Corruption Amnesty Commission will use the platform of www.SecurityinAfrica.com as a launch-pad for its initiatives.

Working alongside fellow Governors, Courtney Griffiths QC, Forz Khan, and Ben Oguntala, He will pursue the goals of the Commission and liaise with governments and other stakeholders in implementing the blueprint of the Commission across Africa, Asia and South America.

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