

Chapter 7

The Post-Racial Illusion



What did it mean for a black man to be elected president of the United States?



The Obama era saw the rise of a new social justice movement, a white nationalist movement, and increasingly heated discussions of race-related issues.

President Obama's historic win in 2008 gave the impression to some that America's race-related problems would soon be a distant memory. But even as Obama's election showed how far American race relations had evolved, the years that followed revealed just how far it still has to go.

When President Obama took office in 2009, he knew racism wasn't dead. He'd faced it on the campaign trail as his opponents implied that he was dishonest and that his loyalties didn't lie with the United States. Images of his face photoshopped with a monkey's muzzle circulated the internet. A conspiracy theory swirled that he was born in Kenya, not Hawaii, spurring him to produce his birth certificate mid-presidency. In numerous instances, Obama figures were lynched in effigy and hung from trees.

But President Obama rarely commented publicly on the racist vitriol against him. He once remarked, "If I stopped to think about it, I'd be paralyzed."



President Obama shaking hands with the next generation in November 2012

credit: Pete Souza, White House photographer



In fact, some African Americans criticized President Obama for speaking so rarely on racial issues while in office. But, as a growing number of sensitive racial issues took center stage in 2012, he could not avoid the topic.

TRAYVON MARTIN

One of the issues that did prompt President Obama to speak out about race involved the killing of a black teenager. On February 25, 2012, a 17-year-old high school student named Trayvon Martin (1995–2012) bought candy and ice tea from a convenience store in Sanford, Florida. He left the store and headed toward his father’s girlfriend’s house, where he was staying. An hour later, Trayvon was dead. He was shot by George Zimmerman (1983–), a 28-year-old man who self-identifies as a white Hispanic, who was volunteering for a neighborhood watch.





Watch Obama's speech below and read one white person's reaction to it. Do you think Obama's speech was appropriate? Why do you think he chose to approach the issue this way? With respect to the reaction, do you agree with the author? What are the most and least convincing parts of this article? Why?



 YouTube Obama Trayvon Martin • National Review Trayvon Martin



George Zimmerman claimed that Trayvon attacked him and that he shot Trayvon in self-defense. Because Trayvon died at the scene, his side of the story is unknown. It is known, however, that a 911 dispatcher advised George to stop following Trayvon, but George continued to do so. It's also known that Trayvon told his girlfriend by phone that a "creepy" white man was following him. A recording also indicated that there was an argument and a scuffle before George fired the shot. George was arrested for the shooting and charged with second-degree murder nearly two months after the shooting.

African Americans were overwhelmingly horrified. Hearing painful echoes of Emmett Till's fateful trip to the store, many felt that George targeted Trayvon because he was a black male rather than because of any particular suspicious behavior. A Reuters/Ipsos poll showed that 91 percent of black Americans felt the shooting was unjustified—but only 35 percent of whites felt similarly.¹

Eventually, George was tried in court for second-degree murder and manslaughter. In 2013, a six-person jury found him not guilty, and he went free. The African American community was devastated.

For many, it was yet another moment
in American history where a white
person took a black life without
suffering legal consequences.

Just after the verdict, an African American woman named Alicia Garza (1981–) wrote a Facebook post about her sadness over the verdict and her compassion for the pain the black community felt. She ended the post with the words: "Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter."



Her friend, Patrisse Cullors (1984–), touched by the post, added the hashtag #blacklivesmatter. From these posts sprang a new social justice movement.

BLACK LIVES MATTER

The Black Lives Matter movement began simply. Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and their friend Opal Tometi (1984–) set up social media accounts urging people to share why they believed black lives mattered. Later, they led a protest in California with signs and posters saying “Black Lives Matter.”

The movement gained national attention in August 2014 after Ferguson, Missouri, erupted in anger and violence. A grand jury had decided not to indict a white policeman who had fatally shot an unarmed 18-year-old black man named Michael Brown (1996–2014).

Alicia and her friends immediately organized “freedom rides” to Ferguson to protest the killing. Protesters marched through the streets chanting “Black Lives Matter.”

An activist holds a “Black Lives Matter” sign at a protest following the officer-involved shooting of Jamar Clark on November 15, 2015, in Minneapolis.



credit: Tony Webster (CC BY 2.0)

COULD HAVE BEEN ME

The outcry and divisiveness over the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case led Obama to make a statement about it. He spoke in a personal way, saying, “Trayvon could have been me 35 years ago,” and urged non-black Americans to understand how painful the case was for African Americans, considering their long history of discrimination. His speech received both praise and disparagement from white Americans. Many people argued that discussing his personal feelings was unpresidential and inflated racial tensions.





In 2017, the Sydney Peace Foundation awarded Black Lives Matter the prestigious Sydney Peace Prize for “building a powerful movement for racial equality, courageously reigniting a global conversation around state violence and racism.” Read more about why the foundation awarded the movement the prize.

 10 things prize black lives matter



Although the majority of Black Lives Matter events have been peaceful, people have criticized the group for several incidents where some protest participants behaved aggressively or shouted inflammatory language during protests or speeches.

The chant spread across the nation. When they returned home, the friends began establishing the Black Lives Matter Global Network.

The organization’s purpose is to end state-sanctioned violence against black people, help fight for police accountability, and promote other forms of social justice through demonstrations, civil disobedience, and community outreach. Its website states it welcomes people of all races and sexuality to participate in the movement, and are unapologetically “black and queer affirming.”

Soon, a backlash formed against the movement. Many white conservatives found the name and concept of the organization “anti-white” or “anti-police.” Some even compared the group to the KKK.

Clamor against the organization grew louder in 2015, when a black Army veteran shot five white military officers in Dallas, Texas, saying he wanted revenge for police killing black men. Although he was not associated with Black Lives Matter, and the organization forcefully denounced his actions, many people blamed the organization anyway.

Some people began using the term “All Lives Matter” in response to the Black Lives Matter slogan.

Proponents argued that whites would be more sympathetic to the cause if the name were more inclusive. Black Lives Matter members and supporters countered that the organization’s name is not trying to say that *only* black lives matter, but that black lives, which have not been highly valued throughout American history, matter as much as other lives.



POLICE BRUTALITY

As the Black Lives Matter movement got underway, the deaths of unarmed African Americans at the hands of U.S. policemen became increasingly publicized. Often captured on video by police body cameras, scenes of violence against black males went viral on social media. African Americans were outraged to witness these deaths, some of which occurred when no crime was being committed. Black Lives Matter protests swelled in response.

A 2015 *Washington Post* study, which tracked fatal police shootings in real time, showed that although whites make up 69 percent of the population, they comprise 49 percent of those killed by police. African Americans make up 13 percent of the population but are 24 percent of those fatally wounded.

This means that blacks are 2.5 times more likely than whites to be killed by police.²

Some people argued that African Americans are disproportionately more likely to commit violent crimes, relative to their population. Other statistics from the Mapping Police Violence project show that police are more likely to use force on blacks and people of color even when they are unarmed or otherwise posing no threat. The statistics also show that 34 percent of blacks killed by police in 2017 were unarmed and not “attacking.”³

Others remarked that it was hypocritical for blacks to protest police killings of African Americans, when far more black people died at the hands of other blacks.⁴ However, studies indicate that everyone is more likely to die at the hands of someone of their own race.

CAUGHT ON CAMERA

Around 2012, police departments across the country began using body cameras and dashboard cameras to monitor police interactions with the public.

As a result, the public witnessed numerous killings of African Americans where the victim posed no threat to the police or public.

Twelve-year-old Tamir Rice (2002–2014) was shot by the police while playing with a toy gun in his neighborhood.

Philando Castile (1983–2016) was shot while reaching for his wallet to show his identification after a policeman pulled him over for having a broken taillight. Why might seeing such incidents make African Americans feel a particular sense of outrage and injustice?



RACE REALITY

As of 2018, Colin Kaepernick has raised and donated approximately \$1 million to youth, education, and community programs. In the fall of 2018, he also became the face of a Nike “Just Do It” campaign, with the tag: “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.”

Numerous African American organizations and societies seek to help reduce crime, improve education, offer mentorship opportunities and training, boost employment rates, and fix other societal conditions that give rise to crime in black communities.

Why might these organizations attract less attention than protests?

The more African Americans and others protested police brutality and the more some white people insisted that there was no problem, the more strained race relations became. Race relations became even more inflamed when, in 2016, Colin Kaepernick (1987–), an NFL quarterback, refused to stand for the national anthem in protest of the police brutality against African Americans.

Many people were incensed, finding his actions disrespectful to the flag, veterans, and country. But Colin continued his protest, later kneeling during the anthem along with some of his teammates. The protest did receive some support from some teams and players, a few coaches and owners, and many members of the public. But society at large did not support it. In 2017, Colin was released from his contract and has not played for the NFL since.

RISING WHITE ANXIETY

As the debates over police brutality continued, signs were growing that working-class white Americans were caught in the grip of a crisis. In 2015, a study revealed that the death rate among middle-aged, working-class whites was rising due to alcohol abuse, suicide, and drug overdoses of prescription opioids and heroin. By 2018, whites in this demographic were 50 percent more likely to die of a drug overdose than African Americans and 167 percent more likely than Latinos.⁵

Some social scientists theorize that this increase in drug abuse and death rates is due to the white working class’s despair over the lack of stable, blue-collar job opportunities. Many have been unable to improve their financial situation.



In addition, some whites were beginning to feel anxious about the changing demographics of the United States. Whites have been the majority racial group in the United States since the country's founding, but now projections show that whites could be a minority by 2045. Some small towns are seeing this change unfold before their eyes.

For example, Hazleton, Pennsylvania, once a town with a clear white majority, is now majority Latino. Some white residents say that although they live together peaceably in the community, they feel "outnumbered."

#MAGA

In June 2015, wealthy businessman and reality television personality Donald Trump (1946–) announced that he would run as a Republican candidate for president. He promised to "drain the swamp" of the political establishment and institute tax and other reforms to help the working class.

At first, the media and other presidential candidates didn't take him seriously, as he frequently spoke and behaved in a manner that many considered outside the bounds of respectability.

But running under the slogan "Make America Great Again," candidate Trump found a strong following among many working-class, white Americans. Some believed he sincerely wanted to help those who felt forgotten by the Democratic Party. His rhetoric appealed to many people who felt that he "tells it like it is" and that he echoed their own feelings.

STATUE STATUTES

America experienced additional racial divisiveness in 2017 over the issue of taking down statues in the South of Confederate Army soldiers from the Civil War. Many people felt that because the statues glorified people who supported white supremacy and racial oppression, they should be removed. Others felt that removing them was like revising or masking history. What is your opinion? Why?



RACE REALITY

The Brookings Institute forecasts that by 2045, whites will comprise 49.9 percent of the population, Latinos 24.6 percent, African Americans 13.1 percent, Asians 7.8 percent, and multiracial people 3.8 percent.⁶ Such projected changes have led some white people to feel worried about being left behind.

Some people feel that “Make America Great Again” is an example of dog-whistle politics. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Other Americans were appalled by Donald Trump’s characterization of Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists, and felt his proposed Muslim ban unfairly cast suspicion on all Muslims as terrorists. Two days after a black activist was shoved and kicked by white supporters during a Trump rally, the candidate tweeted grossly inaccurate statistics about black-on-white crime.

Many felt that the presidential candidate promoted an atmosphere of hate and intolerance, especially when several white supremacist and far-right groups spoke out in support of him. Among these was David Duke (1950–), formerly a prominent leader in the KKK. Nonetheless, in November 2016, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States.

GROWTH OF HATE CRIMES

As racial tensions rose, so did reported hate crimes. In 2015, 5,818 hate crimes were reported, a 6.8-percent increase from the previous year. In 2016, the number grew by 6 percent, and in 2017, it increased by 12 percent in the country’s 10 largest cities. African Americans were the most targeted group, but crimes against Muslims, Jews, and Latinos also increased significantly.⁸

In 2015, a self-identified white supremacist entered an African American church in Charleston, South Carolina, during a Bible study meeting and sprayed the all-black group with bullets as they closed their eyes to pray, killing nine. In 2017, a white man stabbed an African American college student to death days before the young man was to graduate. That same year, during a white nationalist “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, a white supremacist plowed into a crowd of protesters with his car, killing a young white woman.



On social media and the internet, numerous people reported stories of being targets of hate and even captured some of the incidents on video. Asian Americans spoke of being told to “go back to China.” In more than one state, white classmates taunted Latino schoolchildren with chants of “Build the wall!” On two occasions, nooses were found in the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.

Debates over Latino immigration and President Trump’s ban of people from certain Muslim countries created further uproar and division. Many people argued that the Trump administration’s zero-tolerance policy for Latinos perceived to be unlawfully entering or living in the United States was racist and dehumanizing, especially the aspect of the policy that separated children from their parents at the U.S. border. Others argued that it was necessary to stem the tide of migrants entering the country illegally.

One arguably positive effect from all the strife, however, is that the realities of race have again become a topic of national conversation. The question is: Where do we go from here?

KEY QUESTIONS

- **Is there a difference between having “white pride” and “black pride” or “Native American pride” or “Irish pride”? If so, what are the differences?**
- **What role has the internet played in bringing attention to race-related issues? Has it played a positive role, a negative role, or both?**
- **Presidents Obama and Trump have both been blamed for deteriorating race relations. How can a president set the tone for race relations?**

WHITE-ON-WHITE CRIME

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, it’s a common misconception that African Americans are responsible for the majority of murders of white people. FBI statistics have consistently shown that most homicides are committed within racial groups. For example, 2015 FBI statistics show that 82 percent of whites killed were killed by other whites, while 90 percent of blacks killed were killed by other blacks.





VOCAB LAB



Write down what you think each word means.

What root words can you find to help you?

What does the context of the word tell you?

backlash, brutality, civil disobedience, demographics, hate crime, injustice, and intolerance.

Compare your definitions with those of your friends or classmates. Did you all come up with the same meanings? Turn to the text and glossary if you need help.

START A MOVEMENT

Young adults have been responsible for initiating numerous important social movements throughout American history. How do they go about it?

- **Research and analyze a specific social movement in American history.** In your analysis consider the following.
 - What were the goals of the movement?
 - Who was part of the movement?
 - What were the main methods of bringing attention to this particular issue?
 - What slogan was used? Why?
 - What legal arguments were used to support the movement's position? What moral ones?
 - How did it use the mainstream media or social media to spread its message?
 - What made the protest effective (or not)?
- **Select an important issue that you'd like to bring to the attention of your school, community, or the public.** Using all the information you learned from the movement you just researched, develop a written plan for your own movement.

To investigate more, choose an influential leader or group of leaders of an American social movement in history and research how that person or persons were viewed by society at the start of their movement. How are they viewed now? Is it possible to effectively protest a sensitive issue without upsetting the status quo? Why or why not?

