

A PUBLISHERS WEEKLY BOOK OF THE YEAR

KEN WYTSMA



**THE
MYTH
OF
EQUALITY**

Uncovering the Roots
of Injustice and Privilege

Expanded Edition

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ONE

AMERICA'S WHITE STANDARD

A Nation of (European) Immigrants

Lift every voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list'ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON (1871-1938),
"LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING"

IN HIS RECENT BOOK and documentary *America: Imagine the World Without Her*, conservative author Dinesh D'Souza argues persuasively, but dangerously, that the progressive political agenda is tantamount to trying to "shame" America rather than recognizing and admitting her strengths.

I acknowledge the many strengths of the United States that D'Souza points out, and I certainly find some of his language of American exceptionalism compelling. But I disagree with D'Souza on the oversimplified dichotomy that we are either praising America or shaming her.

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There is a difference between shaming and truth telling. The former is for the purpose of tearing down without the goal of building up. The purposes of truth telling, on the other hand, range from a disinterested pursuit of facts to an honest facing of history and culture in pursuit of a more just future.

There's an old saying addressed to those who are hunting for a church: if you find a perfect church, don't join or you will mess it up. People are imperfect and messy, so we should expect congregations made up of people to be messy too.

I think this holds at a national level as well. People are imperfect and messy (the theological language would be that we all have a propensity for sin), and so we should expect our country, made up of sinful people, to be messy too. One look at Congress and its language, rancor, and antics should be enough to convince people that we're far from perfect. The fact that the United States has 4.4 percent of the world's population but 22.2 percent of the world's incarcerated men and women might also show that we're far from our best selves.¹

What I think D'Souza misses is that America really is an organism (note that he refers to it as "her" in his movie title) and that it is perfectly legitimate to take a critical look without shaming. I visit my doctor each year for checkups on my well-being. With every passing year there seem to be more and more things to be checked and evaluated. Knowing the truth of my physical state allows me to get and stay healthy. And every doctor I visit wants a full medical history (the truth about my life up until that point) so they can best diagnose my current condition and best prescribe future treatment.

My desire in looking at our racial past (what has been called "America's Original Sin" in the late twentieth century)² isn't to push America down but to help us know our medical history, as it were, so we can better prescribe the kinds of attitudes and behaviors that might help us repent, turn from our sin, and find reconciliation.

A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

Though we romanticize historic immigration and like to boast that we are a nation of immigrants, from the beginning not all races were created equal in America's immigration and naturalization policies.

I often hear news pundits or see social media posts claiming that although America has a checkered past, we have progressed so far beyond our past mistakes that it is time for minorities to move on—to “get over it.” People making claims like this fail to realize that when a tragedy such as the slave trade or segregation in the South occurs, there are long historical aftershocks. Slavery and segregation may have been dismantled, but racism remains built into our society, and its effects will last for generations.

In order to understand the current state of race relations in the United States, we have to study how they developed.

Among the original Western European colonists and founders of our country, British sentiments and preferences prevailed. In a pamphlet written in 1751, Benjamin Franklin wrote, “Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our complexion?”³ He goes on to say that there are actually very few “purely white people” in the world and identifies the English and Germans of Saxon descent as making up “the principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth.” Franklin admits his partiality for whites such as himself over those with “swarthier” and “tawnier” complexions, as well as the “Sons of Africa.”⁴ Such inclinations eventually settled into a general preference for whiteness that became based not just on skin color but how immigrants' way of life fit into the white American way of life.

In the early days of the United States, until after the Civil War, there were no laws *restricting* immigration. However, the Constitution of the United States gave Congress “the power to establish an uniform Rule

of Naturalization,” and in 1790 it took advantage of that power and established a naturalization act that allowed any “free white persons” who had been living in the United States for at least two years to become citizens.⁵ Though anyone was free to enter the country, only whites who were not indentured servants were allowed to become citizens. This began a long social and legal process of defining whiteness.

In the early years of the law, it seems people were generally classified as white or nonwhite. However, in the late 1800s, more people began to enter the United States who did not fit the socially accepted racial categories. John Tehranian, law professor at Southwestern University, notes that between 1878 and 1952, fifty-two individuals sued to be declared white after immigration officials denied their citizenship request on the grounds of “racial ineligibility.”⁶

According to Tehranian, the legal definition of “whiteness” was important not only for citizenship but for other rights such as property ownership. For example, in California the Alien Land Law—passed in 1920 and affirmed as constitutional by the US Supreme Court—prohibited noncitizens from owning land. So at that point only whites, Americans of African descent (former slaves), and those who went to court and could convince a judge to rule on their “whiteness” had legal rights to own property and participate fully in the economy.⁷

From these cases and legal debates, Tehranian argues that the law contributed strongly to the social construct of race. About this period he writes,

The dominant criterion for the determination of whiteness was not a scientific standard or even a common-knowledge test. . . . Instead, whiteness was determined through performance. . . . [People] demonstrated evidence of whiteness in their character, religious practices and beliefs, class orientation, language, ability to intermarry, and a host of other traits that had nothing to do with intrinsic racial grouping.⁸

Immigrants whom “judges saw as most fit to carry on the tradition of the “White Republic”” were deemed white and allowed to become citizens and own property. In summary, “white privilege became a quid pro quo for white performance.”⁹

After the Naturalization Act of 1790, racial inclusion in the immigration and naturalization process proceeded in fits and starts. On February 2, 1848, the United States and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This treaty ended the Mexican-American War and added half of modern-day California, Nevada, and Utah, and parts of Colorado, Arizona, Wyoming, and New Mexico to the territory of the United States—along with nearly one hundred thousand Mexicans, who automatically became US citizens.¹⁰

The Naturalization Act of 1870 introduced policies and punishments for fraudulent practices but also expanded the naturalization process to include those of “African nativity and to persons of African descent.” However, at this time there were still many other nonwhites who had immigrated to the United States and were unable to become citizens—most notably, Chinese.¹¹

According to census data, by 1870 there were sixty thousand Chinese in the United States, many who immigrated during the Gold Rush and others who came later looking for employment in constructing the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads.¹² In *Welcoming the Stranger*, Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang Yang—Christian activists and experts on American immigration policy—explain: “As has proven to be a theme throughout American history with immigrants from throughout the world, though, the Chinese were welcomed when their labor was needed, but once work became scarce, the welcome wore thin.”¹³ Once the railroads were completed with the aid of Chinese laborers, public opinion shifted: the Chinese were treated as racially inferior and subjected to a series of ordinances and laws designed to drive them out and stop them from taking jobs from US citizens. Historians also documented cases of Chinese being “forcibly driven from

their homes and . . . in other cases victims of lynching and other violence.”¹⁴ As the anti-Chinese hysteria continued, there were calls to stop immigration from China altogether. In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed—“the first significant federal legislation limiting immigration.”¹⁵ The law was repealed in 1943, at which time foreign-born Chinese became eligible for naturalization.

Racial exclusion was a staple of US immigration policy until the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, which eliminated race as a basis for exclusion, but other discriminatory practices existed until 1965.¹⁶

Did you catch that? For the most part, until 1952 you had to be white, deemed white by a court, born on American soil, or of African American descent to be afforded the *full* rights of an American citizen of the United States. This sounds crazy to me, and for much of my life I wasn’t aware of it, even though I grew up conscious of immigration issues. In fact, it was just one year after the racial factors were eliminated from immigration laws that my dad and his family arrived by boat as immigrants from Holland. It was less than a decade after World War II ended and just before oil was found in the North Sea, which revitalized the economies of both England and Holland.

MY FAMILY’S IMMIGRATION STORY

I always knew my dad was an immigrant (we have a particularly Dutch name, we celebrated Dutch traditions such as St. Nicholas Day, and we ate Dutch pastries on New Year’s Eve), but my dad never really talked much about it. In recent years he’s opened up a lot more, talking about growing up during the destruction along the coast of Holland—particularly Rotterdam—and how his family got a new start in Pasadena, California. The Dutch government paid for their boat tickets and gave them a stipend for a household shipment, but they weren’t allowed to leave the country with more than the equivalent of twenty US dollars in their pockets. Apparently my grandpa thought about cheating and rolling bills into gauze but, with my dad watching, decided against it.

Nobody in our family spoke English, and my dad remembers how, as a new immigrant to California at age eight, he really was the odd man out. “Kids can be cruel,” he said; “they pick on anyone who is different.” My dad’s family endured many challenges: my grandmother was wheelchair-bound with multiple sclerosis, and my grandfather worked several jobs to make ends meet. But through it all, he was able to be part of the great “melting pot” that was the new America. I can never remember a time when he spoke with anything other than an American accent or that he ever had trouble fitting in at a social gathering.

For me, and for much of his life, my dad was fully American. The GI Bill paid for his advanced degree, and after marrying my mom, he had a very successful career in the United States Navy, retiring as a captain in command of reservists at Norfolk, Virginia.

My family’s story reveals how the idea of a melting pot reflected reality. You could truly immigrate, learn the language, and blend in at that time. The melting-pot ideal didn’t mean that all different races melted together; however, it meant that *European* ethnicities could be melded into one normative American society. This idea didn’t gain currency until after World War II when Americans had a paternalistic view toward much of Europe because of the war efforts.

Later in life, when my dad was in his sixties working in leadership at a company after retiring from the Navy, one of his colleagues was a friend of Korean descent named Sam. Sam immigrated to the United States as an eight-year-old—the same age my dad was when his family arrived—and also in the mid-1950s, but he spoke with a very distinctive Korean accent. What made the difference? Based on a conversation they had, my dad says it was because nearly all of Sam’s social interactions were in the Korean community, whereas my dad spent all of his time in an English-speaking community.

When I asked my dad if this was related to color, he said, “If you don’t fit in physically or culturally, it forces small communities of immigrants to become tighter and to stay stronger.” Maybe if my dad

had been a different color, it would have been harder to blend in. Or maybe if Sam's family had moved to an area that lacked a Korean community, he would have navigated language and culture differently. But in 1950s America, there was a very real sense in which the various nationalities of white Europe could melt into the pot, while others were less able to do so.¹⁷

Even though the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 eliminated racist criteria from our immigration laws on paper, from 1924 to 1965 the United States had a quota system that restricted immigration based on nationality. In 1924 the initial law limited migration of a foreign population to no more than 2 percent of the population of each nationality already residing in the United States according to the 1890 census. The law used the 1890 census rather than the new 1920 census because the 1890 census had preceded the second great wave of immigrants; thus the new policy gave preference to immigrants from northern European countries and effectively excluded newer immigrants from other parts of Europe and Asia.¹⁸ The exact percentages and census data used varied throughout the course of the quota system, but generally it served to limit immigrants who didn't fit the standards and preferences of white America. In the height of the civil rights movement, it was impossible to neglect racism in our immigration policy. Accordingly, the quota system was eliminated by reforms advocated by John F. Kennedy and finally passed by Lyndon Johnson in 1965. The reforms did away with the most explicitly racist immigration and naturalization policies, but we continue to wrestle with racial bias and other complicated immigration issues today.

Throughout our immigration history you can trace a pattern of how races or ethnicities were demonized and excluded. When we fear a certain group, we exclude them—and then, once we feel okay with that ethnic group, we demonize another.

As Christians we have a responsibility, when we see a pattern like this, to break the cycle of objectifying and marginalizing other people

groups and defining ourselves as against and above them. If every person is made in the image of God, then stereotypes lead us down a dangerous path, short-circuiting the difficult process of loving our neighbors, even if they come from war-torn lands or from cultures completely unlike our own.

UNDERSTANDING WHITE SUPREMACY

People trying to understand race issues frequently ask about the phrase *white supremacy*. This phrase often comes up in conferences where speakers of color seek to advance deep conversation about the racial state of our society.

I remember sitting in the audience at The Justice Conference in Chicago in 2015, after a year of racial turmoil in the headlines. I was listening to a diverse group of speakers address racism, oppression, and racial tension. While black speakers felt comfortable using the phrase *white supremacy* and obviously believed that it described reality, the white speakers completely avoided it.

As I watched the white audience during the conference, scanned some of the social media feeds, and later read the emails that came to me after the conference, it became clear that many of the white leaders in the group were very uncomfortable with the language and even felt threatened or attacked by it.

The struggle for many white listeners is that they've only ever heard this phrase with regard to the Ku Klux Klan or other overtly racist people and organizations from our nation's past. So when they hear it now, they immediately tend to go on the defensive: "I'm not a white supremacist!"

White supremacy was most often used for the Klan and similar groups in the past, but it is increasingly used as a descriptive term in intellectual conversations around race in America today. It's important to understand how people are using language so we can enter more fully into the conversation, more to describe the framework of America

than as an attack on a singular person. Here is how I tried to explain it to those who contacted me following The Justice Conference.

First, white supremacy in the United States is a historical fact. White supremacists, who held to preferential treatment of whites and a discriminatory view of people of color, ruled our government for much of our history. They enacted laws. They built systems. They created powerful social groups and pursued wealth in ways that cannot be fully separated from their racial views and racial policies.

This is “hard” white supremacy: the intentional building and maintaining of white power by those who did not or do not believe in equality.

Second, white supremacy is not only a historical fact; it is also a present reality. We see hard white supremacy today with modern-day fascists and others unabashedly arguing for the reestablishment of white control in America.

“Soft” white supremacy, on the other hand, is not about overt racists or acts of extreme prejudice. Rather, it is descriptive of what happened at the hands of white supremacists: a *white normative standard* that emerged throughout the history of our immigration system, as well as other policies, systems, and social structures. A white normative standard means that whiteness became and was ingrained as the bar or canon by which things were evaluated or contrasted. Whiteness became the racial category by which all others were evaluated.

This white normative standard (or the elevation and protection of whiteness) speaks to foundational aspects of our culture, both in its functioning and in its psychology. There are vestiges that remain, which means that achieving racial equality requires more than just obtaining forgiveness for past wrongs or diversifying our friend network. To be clear, soft white supremacy isn’t just that we are riding a wave of consequence of something that predated us. It also speaks to a complicity in benefiting from racialized systems. The remains of

white supremacy must be dismantled so that our society's foundations and social consciousness are no longer under the lingering shadow of a racialized white standard.

The phrase *white supremacy* is necessary if we are to have deep and nuanced conversations about our past, present, and future sins. White supremacy does not mean that white people are bad, that people of color are better, or that the only people responsible for societal ills are white. Defensiveness in response to the phrase *white supremacy* is an overreaction to a mature conversation. We must be prepared to listen rather than react.

White supremacy simply names a reality that was constructed brick by brick and, like ancient Roman ruins, still marks our landscape. Hard white supremacy would have never allowed a black president. Soft white supremacy is our current reality of racial profiling, mass incarceration of minorities, and a highly segregated society resulting from federal housing policies of previous generations—all while we had a black president.

Yes, we've had our first black president, and Harriet Tubman's image is now slated to appear on new twenty-dollar bills, but those are stitches of progress, not the complete fabric of equality we should be working toward.

The white standard or bias also speaks to the apparent success of Asian Americans in American society. Asian Americans have often been successful within white culture because they approximate it in many respects. When whites look at Asians and feel an affinity with them, it's often on the assumption that Asians seem able to mimic the Protestant work ethic and white values. But in actuality, they are likely embodying the values of *their own* culture. Many Asian cultures have long been known for their relational and communal values, their work ethic (in some cases born of Confucian thought), their focus on education, and other traits that are consonant with white Anglo-Saxon Protestant traditions.

So the fact that Asian Americans, compared with other cultural groups, are able to succeed in America still reflects racism when it is based on approximation to white majority culture rather than on a celebration and understanding of their own unique cultural values and contributions. Many have pointed to this phenomenon as the myth of the perfect immigrant, or the idea of the “model minority.” This is complex; the white standard lies hidden in the ways that American society evaluates the “goodness” of various races.¹⁹

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

What the conversation on white supremacy reveals for me is how hard we try to protect our comfort zone within the church. In what ways do our Christian cultures subtly develop, stagnate, and exclude conversations that would help us better understand each other and possibly grow to a greater unity?

A young chaplain of a Christian university recently asked me how to approach race from a Christian ministry and justice standpoint. He was wrestling with many of the same things I have wrestled with, and he asked if I would visit his school to speak on biblical justice. When I suggested that we make white privilege the topic instead of justice in general, his response was telling. “I’m forbidden by the new school president from allowing the phrase *white privilege* to be used in our chapel services.”

His words saddened me. How can we exclude certain words from our discussions before even hearing the context in which they are used? Christians can sometimes be the worst offenders in this regard when we feel defensive.

My second emotion was probably more appropriate. I thought, *How must it feel for my Christian brothers and sisters of color when overt and subtle forms of racism still persist, yet Christian institutions censor phrases that would help us to be honest about our history and theology of race?*

Avoiding conversations or denying history is usually a charge we Americans level against other countries. Freedom of speech is what we treasure. Or so we think.

Our desire for comfort leads us to defensiveness when we are confronted with questions of race. But when did our comfort become the driving value?

Many people still use the word *colorblind*. It used to be a common phrase for talking about a post-racial way of living. The truth is, however, that not seeing skin color is a form of not seeing reality. Reality not seen is reality that cannot be affirmed. “Colorblindness” is a way we remain blind to the many subtle ways we’re still dealing with a white standard. Colorblindness can lead to a comfort in not seeing or not calling out the need for diversity where it belongs.

I went on a tour of historically black colleges with friends on a trip designed to encourage the next generation of leaders of color. Before I left, I told someone about the trip, and the response was a snide comment: “Black colleges’—that’s so racist! Just imagine what they would say if we had ‘white colleges.’” This kind of comment is all too common. On the surface it seems logical. Such a comment expects race to function like a math equation, with the dominant culture expecting an equal sign between two colors whenever it perceives a dissimilarity that makes it question fairness. We cannot look for similarity, however, without regard to history.

Racism isn’t a math equation. It’s a historical sin that remains a contemporary challenge. The historically black colleges were founded during a segregated time in America, when promising young black men and women weren’t allowed to go to the elite colleges that white students attended. In fact, the four historically black colleges we visited in Atlanta (Clark Atlanta University, Spelman College, Morehouse College, and the Morehouse School of Medicine) share a single section of land in southwest Atlanta—their borders all touch one another. Like four people standing with their backs together for a

degree of protection in a hostile environment, these schools banded together. Each school, existing in the Jim Crow South, experienced various forms of trial and terror both to property and to persons. Together, they were safer.

Today they remain the largest contiguous consortium of African American university students in the United States. So we don't simply say "black colleges," but rather Historically Black Colleges and Universities or HBCUs. Born in the midst of intense racism, they remain a strong part of African American history and culture and have a legacy of producing some of our nation's top entertainers and intellectuals. To say, "Why are there all-black colleges but not all-white colleges?" is to completely miss the fact that for much of America's history, all colleges were almost entirely white.

Historically black colleges were black by necessity, not choice, and they remain strong historical symbols of the priority of education and perseverance in the African American community.

UNDERSTANDING HOW PRIVILEGE WORKS

The creation of a white standard in the world during the age of exploration, and the white structural privilege prevalent for so long in America, led to what is often called "white privilege."

This is hard for many people to fully understand and believe. Some point out that a steep decline in life expectancy is happening right now among poor *white* men due to suicide, liver failure from alcoholism, overdose from opiates, and more. Many white people are struggling financially and simply don't feel like they're experiencing any privilege. Earning power has stagnated, and the cost of living is increasing. Many people, regardless of race or education, are feeling hopeless.

Is talking about white privilege just a way of making white people feel guilty, responsible for what is happening to poor people of color, or does it imply that there is some expectation that white people are not living up to? How are we to understand white privilege?

I often find myself in conversation with a hardworking American, someone who has struggled to make ends meet, and having to insist that white privilege is real.

On one such encounter, I was talking with a young white man running a landscaping service that constructed backyard landscapes, ponds, and fountains. He was very proud of his work ethic and told me that nobody had ever given him anything in life. In short, he believed he hadn't benefited from any privilege.

I asked him in what part of town he did most of his work.

"In the suburbs," he said.

I then asked where, specifically, he did his work.

"Mostly in people's backyards," he answered.

I asked him when he did most of his work.

"Well, during the day, of course," he quickly retorted.

I asked if I could pose one more question, and he said yes. So I asked him how he got most of his business.

He responded, "I put flyers in people's doors and sometimes knock at houses where I think there's a particular opportunity I can offer them."

Having gathered all this information about his business and how his work functions, I asked, "If you were a young man of color in those mostly white suburbs, is it possible you would be received differently by some of the potential clients?"

"For instance, if you were a young black man proposing to work in the backyards of those suburbanites during the day when they're not home, is it possible some of your clients might show a degree of suspicion or bias? If you were Hispanic, talked with an accent, or looked like you were from a culture unfamiliar to the suburban communities where people can afford backyard ponds and fountains, do you think it might—even if ever so slightly—affect how successful you are when you knock on doors to talk to people about possible yard projects?"

He nodded, and I could see from the look on his face that he finally understood white privilege. White privilege doesn't mean your life

isn't hard. It means that if you are a person of color, simply by virtue of that, your life might be harder.

Richard Rohr, Franciscan friar and international speaker, wrote one of the best descriptions of white privilege:

White privilege is largely hidden from our eyes if we are white. Why? Because it is structural instead of psychological, and we tend to interpret most things in personal, individual, and psychological ways. Since we do not consciously have racist attitudes or overt racist behavior, we kindly judge ourselves to be open minded, egalitarian, "liberal," and therefore surely not racist. Because we have never been on the other side, we largely do not recognize the structural access, the trust we think we deserve, the assumption that we always belong and do not have to earn our belonging, the "we set the tone" mood that we white folks often live inside of—and take totally for granted and even naturally deserved. Only the outsider can spot all these attitudes in us. It is especially hidden in countries and all groupings where white people are the majority.²⁰

When we look at a river, it's easy to see that the middle, where the current flows, is much different from the edges, where little pools are formed and things can stagnate. White privilege has meant, historically, that you've been born into the middle of the river, where things flow more easily.

White privilege means that even if you're the unluckiest white person born in the United States, you were still born into a fortunate race. It may not always be like this, and things might be changing fast, but the privilege afforded to the white race in modern Western history is undeniable.

Like Dinesh D'Souza, there is nowhere I'd rather live. But even if we have turned off the spigot of state-sponsored racism (which arguably we haven't), it doesn't mean the water has fully run out of the hose. We

don't enter a post-racial era simply by wanting to; that will require knowing and being honest about our history—and being willing to work toward equality and end discrimination. Eliminating the traces of racism that remain within society and ourselves requires that we understand where that racism came from.

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