

A CALL FOR TRUTH Gabriel Moran

Race relations are not in good condition in the United States of America. More specifically, the situation of black citizens in this country remains problematic. Undoubtedly there has been progress, especially in the last fifty years, but change has been glacially slow in eliminating all forms of discrimination against black people. When terrible incidents occur, events that call into question any real change of attitude among white people, one might despair about the future of this country and its professed ideals.

What would be necessary to shake up the whole country and get most of its complacent citizens to see the depth of the problem? There are many calls to recognize that the long history of slavery continues to have repercussions in today's society. Some white citizens recognize that this history is still a factor in today's society. They are able to grasp intellectually what black people know from their daily experience.

There have been recent signs that a serious movement to oppose racial bias might be beginning. When South Carolina finally took down the flag that slave states had gathered under to defend slavery, an important symbolic victory was won. The cell phone is now revealing what some cops have long been doing to black men, women and children. These cops deserve to be fired and sometimes jailed but they are still only an expression of a country that has yet to face its problem of violence which clearly continues to be manifested in race relations. Students on several campuses have been demanding a change in the reverence shown to some historical figures, including Woodrow Wilson, John C. Calhoun and Thomas Jefferson. Calhoun might not have many defenders today. But attacks on Jefferson and Wilson have caused many historians to spring to the defense of these gentlemen as great men with just a minor flaw of character. Historians might examine whether their own judgments about who is "progressive" need examining. But examining the racism of individual heroes does not yet confront the racism on which the country was built.

A COMMISSION IN SEARCH OF TRUTH

Other nations have had varying degrees of success with what are most often called a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The name promises too much because at best such a commission can get at some hidden truths that are only one step on the path to reconciliation. Even the claim to find *the* Truth cannot be realized. Nevertheless, getting at the cover up which allows a country to live a lie is an indispensable step to achieving genuine peace.

There have been occasional calls for such commissions in this country. Recently, some people wanted to have a commission to unveil the extent of the United States' practice of torture in this century. There have been studies of this scandal which are now buried in scholarly books that not many people will ever read. A real truth commission would be empowered to question under oath the leaders of the country as to their complicity in this gross violation of the human rights that the United States preaches to the rest of the

world. The proceedings would be broadcast live in prime time. We would finally have a reality television show.

In 1997 President Bill Clinton appointed seven experts on race to a commission called the One America Initiative on Race. The aim was to have conversations about race in every part of the country. The commission did not seem to have much effect, perhaps because it was centered on reconciliation without going through the painful process of unearthing the truth about the history of the country.

A truth commission on race should have its focus on the distant past. That is not an evasion of present problems but an attempt to uncover and understand the roots of today's problems. The war of 1861-65 is central to the story but it is neither the beginning nor the end of the country's inability to come to terms with race. No search for the truth can avoid examining the founding of the United States of America and the grand cover up about how and why the country came to exist.

The commission to dig for the truth should be composed of a dozen men who are white, middle-aged or older, and the beneficiaries of the opportunities offered by their country. It may be difficult to find twelve such men willing to take on this job. The proposed composition of the panel clashes with our understandable efforts today to make organizations and study panels representative of the country in race, gender, age, etc. In this case, however, it was white gentlemen who created the problem; it is just and fitting that their heirs should be the bearers of truth about the origin of the country. They would be responsible for bringing together and publicizing the hard truths about the origin and history of the country that are not in our standard history books and in the schoolbooks for children.

The commission should include some major historians of the 18th century. There are white historians of the period who have unearthed many of the facts about slavery in the founding of the country. What I hope for is a few historians to make a public confession that they had not grasped the significance of slavery as the very basis on which the country was founded.

THE FOUNDATIONAL MYTH

A truth commission could explore the following thesis:

The United States of America was conceived by former British colonies that united under the claim to be America; it was born as a place of liberty for adult, white males whose economy depended on enslaved Africans. The conceiving of this nation can be found in a 1776 document that was entitled "A unanimous Declaration by the thirteen united States of America." The nation's birth was accomplished a decade and a half later as embodied in the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Someone might argue that the roots of our racial problem go back before 1770. That is certainly true if one is going to explore the history of America which has existed since the sixteenth century, and the importing of the first African slaves to the British American

colonies in the seventeenth century. But it is the cover up in the founding of the republic in the late eighteenth century that most needs to be grasped by today's white citizens of the United States.

If it were possible to puncture the mythology that envelops the founding of the nation, the roots of our racial problem would become evident. The problem of a national identity is captured in how people name a country and what its citizens are called. White scholars seem incapable of deeply examining the term America which was invented in the early sixteenth century as a dream of liberty in the continent of a new world. Black speakers and black literature hold the key to grasping the difference between the existing, imperfect nation and a wonderful ideal toward which the country should move.

A DECLARATION

Nothing is more central to the myth of the country than the document known as the Declaration of Independence. People who claim to be ardently defending the Constitution regularly confuse it with the Declaration. The Speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner, once recited lines from the Declaration on the House floor while waving a copy of the Constitution. Most people in the country are unfamiliar with the contents of the Declaration which is mainly a series of charges against the king. But everyone has heard those few sentences in the preamble saying that all men are equal, that all men have inalienable rights, and that governments have been founded to protect those rights.

Critics of the Declaration immediately pointed out that the statements are not true. There is nothing self-evident about all men being equal, the idea of inalienable rights emerged in the late middle ages, and governments were never founded to defend individual rights.

Defender of the claims might say that while those statements are not true of the past the author and signers of the document were promising that those things would be true in the government that they intended to found. The problem with that defense is that the author and signers of the document had no intention that their "free and independent states" would recognize the equality and rights of their slaves (and groups other than adult white males). In his critique of the Declaration, Jeremy Bentham wrote: "Rather surprising it must certainly appear that they should advance maxims so incompatible with their own present conduct." More bluntly, abolitionist Thomas Day wrote: "They signed the resolution of independence with one hand; the whip over slaves with the other." The words did have an effect in announcing an ideal that many other groups later appealed to, but unfortunately the republic that emerged in the 1780s could not acknowledge that its reality was far removed from these ideals.

The most sacred day of the year in the United States is July 4th. The day is celebrated with speeches referring to the "birthday of America" and the celebration of liberty. If *America* can be said to have a birthday it would be the day in 1507 that two German map makers wrote the word America across what is today Brazil. If the *United States* has a birthday it is presumably a day in the 1780s when the "thirteen united States of America" proclaimed themselves to be a single entity.

As for a celebration of liberty, the fourth of July speech that white citizens should read is the 1852 address of Fredrick Douglass entitled “What to the slave is the fourth of July?” Douglass begins and ends the speech by giving due credit to good things about the country and the hope still possible for the young nation. But to the question in the title, he responds: “I answer a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham, your boasted liberty, an unholy license, your national greatness, swelling vanity....There is not a nation on earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States at this very hour.”

As Douglass correctly perceived, slavery was not a small blemish on the Declaration and on the republic that would emerge. And it was not as if no one had yet thought of getting rid of slavery. There were abolitionist stirrings in the British Empire in the 1770s that greatly concerned the slaveholders who signed the Declaration. In 1772 Lord Mansfield in London freed a slave who was “owned” by an American colonist; the slave was about to be taken to Jamaica to be sold. More worrisome to the colonists was Lord Dunmore’s offer to free and arm Africans to quash a revolt against British rule. During the war that followed, George Washington feared arming slaves lest they side with the British. Many slaves could easily recognize that their liberty was to be found with the British not the rebellious colonies. The British would subsequently banish slavery while slavery was flourishing in the United States.

A CONSTITUTION

In the 1780s there was a proposal to hold a convention for the purpose of strengthening the connections between the confederated states. The intention was not to replace the Articles of Confederation. A few wise men, however, realized that a bigger change was needed. They wanted a national government for a new nation. Ultimately they failed and had to settle for clumsy compromises in a new federation of states. The federal government would have only the power which the states decided they would be willing to relinquish. The preamble to the Constitution which begins “We the people of the United States...” would more accurately have begun “We the thirteen states of the united states....”

The restriction on the power of the government to act as set out in the Constitution was driven home in the tenth amendment. The usual summary of the amendment is that the powers not given by the states to the federal government are reserved to the states. But that is not what was written. The amendment says that the powers not given to “the United States” are reserved to the states. For those who shout about “states’ rights” the issue is not the state government as opposed to the federal government but instead the state versus the nation. Slavery became the key issue in that opposition.

Even in 1860 when Abraham Lincoln was running for president he insisted that he did not have the power or the wish to abolish slavery in states where it existed. Eventually he did recognize that a nation cannot endure half free and half slave. But despite amendments after the war that tried to create a nation it was “America” that held the

states together. A national government is still resisted. When South Carolina was pressured to take down its symbol of slavery, politicians in South Carolina insisted that it was a state problem and no one else's business. Actually, it was a national disgrace and an international embarrassment.

The writers of the U.S. Constitution refused to face the issue of slavery. It was not that they overlooked the problem. As slaveholders they were acutely aware that the economy was built on slave labor and that many of the states would not accept a prohibition of slavery. The reality of slavery in the founding of the country was not just a southern problem. In 1790 New York City was, after Charlestown, the largest slave market in the United States; forty percent of households in the New York area had slaves.

The term slavery does not appear in the text of the Constitution. The clearest reference which appears in article one is a weird compromise which says that, in addition to the whole number of free persons, "other persons" will be counted as three-fifths of a person. The slave states were given more power than if the slaves were not counted at all. When Republican leaders in 2013 made a great show of reading the Constitution in the House of Representatives they could not bring themselves to read article one, section two, paragraph three.

The thirteenth amendment is said to have abolished slavery but that is not exactly true. Why couldn't the United States have simply declared: "Slavery is abolished." Instead, the text is: "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 text clearly says that criminals can be treated as slaves. The prison industry in the United States has followed that lead. The land of liberty has two million people in prison, the highest rate of incarceration in the civilized world. The majority of the prison population is non-white. One out of every three black men in the United States can expect to spend time in prison.

CLAIMING TO BE AMERICA

A major problem confronting the delegates to the Convention in 1787 was what to call the new nation. After trying out a few possibilities they decided simply to say that the Declaration of Independence's "Thirteen united States of America" was now one United States of America. Until 1865 "United States" was usually used with a plural verb; after the war "United States" almost always has used a singular verb but "United States" was increasingly replaced by "America" in naming the country. From its beginning, the country has used the idea of America to hold the states together, but that also means that "America" has been used to hide the problem of whether there is a united states of Massachusetts, New York, Virginia, Texas, and the rest.

The identifying of the new nation with America implied two claims: 1) that these united states had a "continental" destiny 2) that this land of liberty had a mission to liberate every nation from the oppressions of history. If the new republic had called itself the United States *in* America, it would have signaled a willingness to enter treaties with other

nations on the American continent. And the religious impulse to identify itself with the end of history and its accompanying violence might have been restrained. Instead, the country announced that it was already the ideal of America which every other country must follow. There is no need for any serious reforms in this country; America always has been and always will be perfect. Would-be radical reformers on the left get nowhere attacking America. They are still enveloped by the myth of the United States being America.

The people of the United States called themselves the Americans. Of course they had a right to a share of the term as inhabitants of the American continent but they did not have a right to be “the Americans.” They surely did not have a right to define an American as a free, white man.

People in the United States revere the Constitution as if it were sacred scripture instead of a fallible document that is written in 18th century language. Politicians and constitutional experts treat every word of the text in a way that resembles fundamentalist preachers quoting the bible. All kinds of answers today are sought for questions that neither the bible nor the US Constitution dreamed of asking. That is not to say that these document cannot be valuable resources, each in its own way. The bible is a story that is properly set in its time and contains moral guidance in the form of stories. The US Constitution does not need replacement but it needs a major overhaul to remain the legal framework for the country. Even if one or several major amendments could be adopted, which is almost impossible to imagine, the change would be a patch when major surgery is needed.

The commission I proposed earlier would probably become possible only in the wake of a national crisis, most likely involving, war, race and poverty. In the 20th century what changed United States race and gender relations was World War II, something not obvious because of a fifteen year gap before the change became evident in the 1960s. Perhaps we are already in the middle of a swelling crisis that began with the election of Barack Obama. Donald Trump has attempted and has been largely successful in trashing nearly every institution on which the country is built. He has never had majority support but he has had enough support to carry out his reign of destruction.

When people refer today to the possibility of a constitutional crisis they may not grasp that they are talking about a crisis in the existence of the United States. What might come to exist would be fifty states. The states’ rights advocates in South Carolina or Alabama should be happy that their states will be as the Declaration said “free and independent states, having all the power that states have.” However, they might find it is too much of a good thing when there is no federal government intervening.

Simply to survive, the country will need a constitutional convention to provide a basis for a government in the 21st century. This time it has to be a meeting of “we the people” not “we the states.” That is, the assembly should reflect a cross section of the nation’s population. A Constitution should provide protections for minorities but it should support a democracy and not be opposed to democratic procedures, such as voting for president, which the rich, white men of the 18th century feared. Whether something called a bill of

rights should be clumsily added to the Constitution is something to debate; if retained the language of each bill needs to be rewritten, especially to express what the government should do to protect rights rather than, as in the present constitution, only what the government will not do.

To what degree a United States president is in touch with reality can be measured by his use of the term America. The confusion between the nation and an idea about the nation has not been cleared up in the course of history. Instead, the cover up about the origin of the country has made the problem become worse. Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address does not contain the term America ("American" is used once as a modifier of slavery). What is always quoted from that speech is the beautiful final paragraph appealing for reconciliation: "With malice toward none, with charity for all..." What precedes those words is a blistering criticism of a country that has accepted slavery from its beginning. Perhaps, said Lincoln, this woe of war is what both north and south deserve.

In the twenty-first century it would be impossible to find any political speech that is not loaded with references to America. Ronald Reagan had seemed to go as far as was possible in substituting "America" for the "United States" but George W. Bush outdid him by nearly severing linguistic ties to the United States. In his first Inaugural Address, Bush referred twenty times to America/American but not once to the country whose presidency he was assuming. The country should have known on that day that it was in for bad times with a man who thought he was the president of America.

Republican candidates since then have continued to speak under a shelter provided by the Fox News Channel where references to the United States are almost non-existent. Mitt Romney in his acceptance speech at the 2012 Republican convention used "America" fifty-six times with little reference to what a United States president encounters. In the many hours of Republican debates in 2015 and the debates of the candidates in 2016 the term America was used hundreds of times; only a couple of times did the United States slip in.

Democrats are only slightly better than Republicans in talking about the country instead of a dream about the country. In her book *Hard Choices*, Hilary Clinton says that the big question for presidential candidates is, what is your vision of America? I would suggest that instead of being asked for their vision of America, candidates should be asked if they accept the existence of the United States. An affirmative answer is certainly not clear from the way most of them speak.

Donald Trump was the con man that the country had always been vulnerable to. He shamelessly exploited popular belief in America for his own fame and wealth. Through the fantasies of "reality" television he created a myth about his skill as a businessman and negotiator. He built a political base with racist attacks on Barack Obama and announced his candidacy with vicious attacks on Mexicans. Black people saw through him immediately and gave him almost no political or electoral support.

Trump did not expect to win the election and was totally unprepared to actually govern. But he thought it would be easy being the boss of America rather than the president of the United States. Backed by the money of other rich, white men as well as a television empire, he found he could say one outrageous thing after another. His policy was simply to oppose anything that his predecessor had done. His inaugural address was a long and disgraceful attack on the work of former presidents and filled with lies about the state of the country. His first State of the Union Address in 2018 used the term America 82 times, indicative of the fantasy world in which he lives.

THE UNITED STATES HAS NEVER BEEN AMERICA

What might help presidential candidates to anchor themselves in the real country of the United States would be to read black literature past and present, and even better, listen to what black people say of their experience. Not surprisingly, many black people struggle with the term America. But from early in the nineteenth century there is a constant theme of recognizing that this nation is not the real America, the land of liberty. David Walker in his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* in 1829 relentlessly attacks white Americans but he is clear that he wishes to be a citizen of the United States.

It is remarkable that black people under slavery and since then have almost always had a love of this country and a belief in its future. They were not naïve about the shortcomings of the nation that now exists. But even in the slave literature of the 1840s there is a penetrating understanding that the real America is in the future. That remained true of the great twentieth-century black writers. Despite their denunciation of the country and its history they hoped in an America that could be. James Baldwin passionately attacks “White Americans” as living in an illusion about their country. But he can still write to his nephew that “we can make America what America must become.” White politicians quote Langston Hughes’ line of “let America be America again” but they do not quote the conclusion of the poem that follows that line: “The land that never has been yet – And yet must be – the land where every man is free.

The practice of calling Martin Luther King Jr.’s most famous speech the “I have a dream speech” is a way to conveniently forget all that precedes the ending of the speech, namely, King’s indictment of the United States and its history. King has become the white peoples’ favorite black reformer, forgetting that he was intensely hated in his lifetime, especially when he connected racial discrimination to war and poverty. King was right that America is a dream of the future not an existing country. America, as a dream of liberty, was appropriated by one nation to describe itself. King was insisting that the dream is corrupt so long as that nation does not provide liberty and justice for all of its people. The United States has never come close to being America.

Could white people ever accept the severe criticism of United States history that black literature contains? Not so long as children are still being indoctrinated into what is called “American history.” The current controversy over the curriculum of Advanced Placement U.S. history pertains to a stage of education that is far too late. It is in the first grade that the child begins to be immersed in the celebration of “American history” with all its

glorious battles for truth, justice and the American way. Even left-wing historians who claim to be very critical of the nation's past, regularly interchange "U.S. history" and "American history" as if they were referring to the same thing.

No one gets anywhere in this country attacking America. And there is no need for such an attack on America which remains a beautiful idea. But there is an urgent need for citizens of the United States to recognize their country as distinct from the idea of America. That recognition includes learning some hard truths about their country's past. There cannot be racial reconciliation until whites know and accept these truths about slavery and the violence that is a continuing legacy of this tragic flaw in the origin of the United States of America.

Would it be humiliating for the United States to admit what is not so glorious about its past? Actually it would improve the United States' standing in a world that resents its bullying in the name of America. It is not a tamer America that the world needs but a more realistic United States that can admit its mistakes and strive in Lincoln's words "to do all that may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace for ourselves and among all nations."