

## Those invisible racists

### Donald Trump claims that he is not a racist. So do most Americans. How true is it?

**Some like to claim racism is no longer a problem, or that there really aren't any racists anymore. Others admit that there are, but say that they aren't among them.**

Since the comments in which he called Haiti, El Salvador and every single nation on the African continent a “shithole,” much of the country has spent the last five days debating whether or not Donald Trump is a racist. Frankly, this debate is a complete and utter waste of time since we know, through his very own words and deeds, that Trump is a racist and has demonstrably been so for his entire adult life.

Of course, he claims to be the “[least racist person](#)” ever interviewed. This is not at all surprising. Even though Trump lies as easily as most people might breathe, we have no reason to not believe that he doesn't think that he is racist. One of the realities of racism in the United States is that very few people actually believe that they are racist, even though they were absolutely socialized into a racist country and world.

“I'm not racist” or “I'm not prejudiced” is a disclaimer that far too many white people proclaim often, particularly in conversations with people of color. Upon hearing those three little words, most of the time, people of color instantly brace ourselves for a racist, insensitive or willfully ignorant comment from the speaker that we have to decide whether to address or ignore.

After a while, this becomes exhausting—as we are consistently burdened with enduring countless microaggressions, indignities and outright hostility from white people who believe themselves, above all, to be “good people.” This investment in being a good person essentially positions racism as the beliefs and behaviors of “others”—absolving said person of the responsibility of having to look in the mirror. Good, bad, or indifferent, almost zero white people will own up to being a racist. So it should not surprise us that Donald Trump thinks that he isn't a racist either, though he clearly does and says racist things.

Part of the issue is that racism has come to mean many things in the United States. It has been so diluted and manipulated over time that we don't fully understand what it means and who is responsible for it. To a certain extent, we freely admit that racism has existed in the past and that aspects of our country were built on it. We know that racism is bad. But, somehow, in our wishful thinking about what America should be, instead of what it actually is, we have created the conditions where many believe that racism no longer exists and where people no longer practice it.

Racism seems to be banished to some long ago and forgotten realm that is not at all relevant to the time period in which we live. To that end, most people refuse to acknowledge their part in it. Our collective denial and amnesia has made America a land that has a deep history of racism but has no actual racists.

This is kind of like how we know that slavery existed but no one white claims to be the descendant of slave owners. Just like the enslavement of blacks in this country seems to have magically invented itself and existed on its own without culpable individuals (or the belief that not a single one of those individuals has nearly any living relatives), so too, is it believed that racism exists as an anomaly without any individuals who perpetuate it.

Charles Blow wrote a recent column in the *New York Times* entitled [“Trump Is a Racist. Period.”](#) In it, he said the following:

I find nothing more useless than debating the existence of racism, particularly when you are surrounded by evidence of its existence. It feels to me like a way to keep you fighting against the water until you drown.

The debates themselves, I believe, render a simple concept impossibly complex, making the very meaning of “racism” frustratingly murky.

So, let’s strip that away here. Let’s be honest and forthright.

Racism is simply the belief that race is an inherent and determining factor in a person’s or a people’s character and capabilities, rendering some inferior and others superior. These beliefs are racial prejudices.

The history of America is one in which white people used racism and white supremacy to develop a racial caste system that advantaged them and disadvantaged others.

There are some things to debate or perhaps clarify about Blow’s definition—one being whether or not people of color can be racist. Let’s put that aside for now—not because people of color cannot participate in harmful racial prejudice against one another and whites (they can), but because this notion often ignores power dynamics and is used to equate white supremacy and white racism with individual and group level dynamics enacted by people of color. These are not the same things.

One is a systematic and structural level problem that is global. The other is not. People of color en masse have never had the power to put white people at the bottom of any kind of hierarchy or disadvantage them.

At any rate, Blow reminds us that racism is part of the history of America. One in which we are all socialized in and living in. That, in itself, isn’t the fault of any one of us or anyone living. It is simply

the country and world we were born into. It doesn't matter if one's parents, grandparents, loved ones or friends explicitly said negative things about non-white people. The messages that white people are superior were and are everywhere—in school, on TV, in church, in our politics, in fashion, in popular culture and beyond. White people internalize those messages. People of color internalize those messages. And all of us need to unlearn what we've been taught and heal in order to be the kind of diverse, inclusive and equitable nation we say we are.

One place to start is to acknowledge that not only racism exists, but that so-called “good” individuals are capable of it—not just Neo-Nazis and Klu Klux Klan members. A year and change after Trump's election, many white people are still excusing away the racism of Trump's base as voters, most of whom are not racist, but were simply sick of elitism and fueled by economic woes.

And finally, we have to stop giving a pass to the people — whether elected official or average voter — who support and defend his racism. If you defend racism you are part of the racism. It doesn't matter how much you say that you're an egalitarian, how much you say that you are race blind, how much you say that you are only interested in people's policies and not their racist polemics.

As the brilliant James Baldwin once put it: “I can't believe what you say, because I see what you do.” When I see that in poll after poll a portion of Trump's base continues to support his behavior, including on race, I can only conclude that there is no real daylight between Trump and his base. They are part of his racism.

While it is true that Trump's supporters are part of his racism, it's also true that they don't exist in a vacuum. The constant defense of his voters is a form of racism. The constant calls on the left to ignore “identity politics” because they distract from a win against Republicans (as if white people don't practice identity politics) is a form of racism.

Our inability to talk about racism meaningfully and center anti-blackness in those discussions is a form of racism. The belief that talking about race and racism is the problem is a form of racism. Finally, consistently proclaiming yourself as “good,” “morally superior” and “non-racist” while evading any kind of actual responsibility for racism is a form of racism.

Donald Trump did not invent racism. Donald Trump isn't even the first racist person to hold the office of the presidency. He has, however, done much to rip off the polite veneer of political correctness in our society—to the benefit of his base. Whether we want to admit it or not, we have many racists among us. Donald Trump knows that and it's what got him to the White House. This is the result of living in a racist society.

But let's be really clear—the racists include “good white people.” If it were only the “bad” ones, how is it that Donald Trump won the white vote across almost all demographics, except college-educated

white women? Unfortunately, proclaiming you are not a racist doesn't make it so—especially if you pretend to be colorblind, are not actively working to be anti-racist or doing racist things (intentionally or not).

Deep down inside, most of us know that, which is why we don't believe Trump when he says it. The first step is admitting we have a serious problem with racism and that good people are a part of it. Only then can we begin to fix it.

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