A conference sponsored by the American Historical Association and the National Museum of African American History and Culture with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and HISTORY™

The Future of the African American Past

May 19-21, 2016
Washington, DC

The Idea of "Race" As a Political Strategy

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In my brief remarks I plan to outline three broad themes that illustrate the ways African American history has informed and shaped the trajectory of United States history. First, people identifying themselves as "white" have persistently deployed ideologies of "racial" difference as political strategies; that is, these whites have found the notion of "race" to be useful—even imperative—in advancing their own self-interest, whether defined in economic, military, political, or social terms. Second, these self-identified whites have sought to advance the idea that the fight for civil rights has always constituted a zero-sum game—in other words, the idea that full and equal rights for black people would necessarily diminish the rights of white people. And finally, I argue that, throughout American history, legal efforts to discriminate against and marginalize black people resulted not from whites' conviction that blacks and whites were different, but rather, from the opposite viewpoint—whites' realization of the reality that in their aspirations for themselves and families, black people shared basic values with whites; indeed, it was this realization of shared values and yearnings that spurred all the many fierce kinds of efforts to maintain white privilege *via* the legal and political systems.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, white ideologues and politicians worked to develop theories of racial difference that could be used as rationalizations—pretexts, really—to exploit the labor of descendants of Africans, and to render them powerless within the body politic. During the seventeenth century, Africans found themselves uniquely vulnerable within an Atlantic World of colliding empires; unlike the citizens of sea-faring nations, Africans had no imperial power that could rescue them or redeem them on the high seas or in far-off lands. This unique vulnerability manifested itself in dramatic ways as European powers searched for subordinate forms of labor that could be harnessed to mine and grow the riches of the New World. Thomas Jefferson and other political theorists and pseudo-scientists labored to advance the idea that black people were somehow fundamentally different from people of African descent in their intelligence, temperament, and fitness for self-government. What began as a concerted effort to rationalize the enslavement of millions of people gradually revealed itself as a strategy useful in all sorts of other situations and circumstances: In the late nineteenth-century, white southern textile owners could invoke "racial difference" to deny black men and women jobs as machine operatives; these whites argued that black people lacked the ability to work machines, or that the sound of mechanical looms "naturally" put them to sleep. Developed around this time with far-reaching consequences, the tenets of scientific racism held that black people were incapable of voting in a responsible way, or making good use of a formal education—all ploys to protect the privileges of whites. Historically, racial ideologies have not been consistent, nor have they been static, but rather they have demonstrated remarkable fluidity throughout time and space.

That fluidity was in evidence when whites claimed that any effort to advance the rights of black people would necessarily come at the expense of whites' economic security or political power. In antebellum New England, politicians preyed upon the fears of Irish immigrants, anxious that they would be relegated to ill-paid, sporadic employment. Within this heated political arena, the Irish believed that to the extent that black children received schooling, their own children (now deprived of "white" privileges)

would suffer accordingly. In the twentieth century, demagogues north and south made the argument that opening up employment opportunities for blacks would come at the expense of whites; in this sense, then, many whites apparently believed that civil, political, and even human rights were finite, and that black progress would inevitably signal white failure and distress. Again, these claims could be useful to the politicians who made them. And such impulses were not limited only to Mississippi's James K. Vardaman or Alabama's George C. Wallace, the race-baiting southern governors, but also a plethora of local and national politicians since have found election-day gold in scape-goating the most vulnerable groups in the U. S. population. Think of Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy" and the encoded language used to promote it—forced busing, crime in the streets. In fact of course we have only to consider public discourse today— which in certain quarters dwells upon and demonizes people of color, including African Americans, undocumented immigrants from Latin America, and Muslims—to see that this political strategy remains timely, fully operational, here in the early twenty-first century.

It is of course counter-intuitive to claim that ideologies of racial difference—and the discriminatory laws and policies, and even instances of state-sponsored terrorism that they spawned—have stemmed from white people's recognition that virtually all groups have in common basic values and lifetime aspirations. Yet ironically that was the message conveyed when Charles Town, South Carolina, officials sought to ban enslaved men and women from trading during the Revolution (virtually all Lowcountry folk wanted to trade), or when local school boards sought to ban black children from public schools, or when employers bowed to the pressure of their white employees and refused to hire blacks for certain jobs, or when state constitutional conventions disenfranchised black voters. Despite the harsh restrictions under which they lived and labored, blacks made it abundantly clear that they sought outlets for their entrepreneurial impulses, good jobs at decent wages, and education for their children, as well as the right to participate fully in the political process, the freedom to worship on their own terms, and the opportunity for a safe and secure family life. Perversely, then, these shared values found twisted expression in the laws

and customs meant to deny their existence, and meant to deny the full and open acknowledgement that they even existed.

These brief examples suggest that African-American history is not so much a sub-field of U. S. history as a field of study congruent with U. S. history—that the African-American past is so thoroughly embedded in the nation's larger story that it is difficult to separate the two fields of inquiry with any precision. Long past is the time when a respectable textbook could be counted upon simply to add a chapter on slavery, or to append a couple of sentences to a section, explaining how the experiences of black people contradicted everything that had been claimed in the preceding paragraphs. Certainly it is the achievement of recent African American historiography that scholars have shown how enslaved labor fueled not only the American Industrial Revolution, but the modern world capitalist economy; and so I am certain that we can look forward to a future of the African-American past that continues to illuminate the ways that African American history *is* American history.