

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45: Congress can, and should, establish a 21st century commission on race relations

October 09, 2017

CONTRIBUTORS:

ADRIANNA PITA

NICOL TURNER-LEE

Fellow, Center for Technology Innovation

Governance Studies

(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

TURNER-LEE: Hello, I am Nicol Turner-Lee, and I'm a fellow in the Center for Technology Innovation which is part of the Brookings's Governance Studies program. And today I'll be speaking about a new blog that I published "Can white supremacy be legislated under Trump?" It is available in the Fix Gov newsletter.

And because I pose it as a question, I'm going to come out early on and say my response is no. Last August, Charlottesville, Virginia was an ugly reminder of the despicable face of racism and white supremacy in our nation. And just this past weekend a smaller group convened to sort of highlight and surface what that horrid day looked like in August. It was a small group though.

As supremacists marched in solidarity last August against efforts to remove a confederate statue boiling under the surface was the resurgence of racial politics, one has played out since the election of President Trump. On that day, armed with tear gas, carrying Wal-Mart tiki torches, and with uncovered faces these self-avowed white nationalists were marching towards a more unified white America. One that has been pillaged in their perspective by the nation's diversity.

Now without hashing and rehashing that horrible day, which fueled the nerves of all citizens and even those abroad, what we saw via Twitter and broadcast news was something that has always been present but perhaps less visible and that is white supremacy. And when Heather Heyer and a crowd of counter-protesters were plowed into by a speeding car it further demonstrated that America has hit a crossroad, especially when a white woman was killed as a result of this act of domestic terrorism.

In my blog I reacted to the bipartisan support of a congressional mandate that essentially rejected white supremacists and other hate groups at the Charlottesville. And this was especially in response to the president's lackluster and ambivalent response. His notion, and this is President Trump, that there were many sides at fault

encouraged me to write this piece, and more importantly respond to the lack of culpability and capability of this administration to do something productive in response to a troubling incident which has now led to a fractious society when it comes to U.S. race relations.

A recent poll just came out that suggest that seven out of ten Americans think that U.S. race relations do not fare well. The chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, Cedric Richmond from Louisiana, just penned emotional letter decrying the president's handling of race and his apparent lack of empathy towards harmony and his support of various policies regressing civil rights and social justice gains. We've seen the repeal of DACA, to a recent anchoring in the utility of affirmative action, to even Vice President Pence's lack of sensitivity towards the civil disobedience of NFL players this past weekend when he walked out.

You know in the '60s, places that included Newark, New Jersey and Detroit, Michigan were burning upon the mistreatment of African-Americans by the police. Race relations were at an all-time low with more than a hundred and fifty protests occurring across the country. President Lyndon Baines Johnson at that time, he launched the 11-member National Advisory Commission on Civil disorders to study what was at the root of racial disturbance, and though the report ultimately pointed back to the residual effects of institutional racism and discrimination it brought to the surface his compelling problem of race that can't seem to go away in this country.

And I would argue, as I said in the blog, that Trump is not capable of commissioning such an advisory panel much like Johnson. When you're still debating the patriotism of citizens in public policy clearly there's no way that you're going to look at the productiveness of this type of entity. But Congress can.

The congressman who pushed this resolution through to reject white supremacy could work across the aisle to get the same like-minded individuals to come together and discuss the current state of play, but also the policies that continue to maintain the fractions within our country.

I thought about this prior to the podcast and I want to share a couple of questions that I think could define this commission. First, it could look at historically disadvantage challenges that continue to be at the epicenter of U.S. race relations. Education policies that maintain the trajectory of poverty for school age children of color. The impact of criminalization on black men and how it maintains black poverty. But it can also look into what we saw in Charlottesville and what we continue to see today; why the white poor working class are waging their discontent against people who share some of their same economic circumstance, how racial identity politics are playing out among these populations, what aspect of white privilege are they missing out on, and why do they feel that way.

A 21st Century commission could delve into the who, what, why, and how. We are still entrenched in the racial divisions of today not less than a decade after the Civil Rights Movement. Author and poet James Baldwin wrote in his politic book "the fire next time," and I summarize, that "the problem of racism is not that of just only the oppressed but rather those that engage in the oppression." And perhaps the commission should take a hard look at whether or not we're changing the pages of history, or, whether it's worth to call out those that want to keep us in the same place.

PITA: If you've been listening to 5 on 45 and like what you're hearing, please take a minute to rate and review us on iTunes. And don't forget to follow us and the rest of the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts.