

OUT OF PRIVILEGE



THE PODCAST

109 -- “Hope in the face of Brutal Reality“ (Transcription)

Welcome to the Out of Privilege podcast featuring Dr. Byron Burkhalter, where we will talk about issues of racism, white privilege and the role they play in current affairs. Byron earned his doctorate in sociology from UCLA and has been focused on issues of race biracial identity, whiteness and multiracial political coalitions in U.S. history for more than 30 years. He has taught at the university level, spoken at large public rallies and published numerous pieces on these issues. He takes an historical and sociological look at the systemic racism that the United States in particular is battling today.

I'm Genevieve Haldeman and I'll be your host.

Is white privilege preventing us from living up to the founding ideals of this country? Does it take us further away from each other in the community building required for us to realize the true American dream? In today's podcast, we talk about the first article in the 1619 project by Nicole Hannah-Jones and what it's going to take for us to understand how to love this country in all its glory, with all its flaws. Take a listen and let us know your perspective in the comments.

Genevieve: One of the Out of Privilege discussion groups has just started reading the 1619 project that was curated by Nicole Hannah-Jones of The New York Times. She

wrote the first article and describes how Black Americans have fought hard to make the country's founding ideals true. I think I was most surprised by the story about how, before he became known as the emancipation president, Abraham Lincoln met with some of the significant Black leaders of the time and offered to ship them back to Africa, even though most of them had never been anywhere but the United States and were connected to the history here, more than any other location.

Being multiple generations removed from my own family's immigration to the United States, I have a similar feeling and would be devastated if someone tried to ship me off somewhere else. What struck you in the group when you read the article?

Byron: I'm always trying to be aware in the group about where the other participants are affected and they were affected exactly where you were, and I was actually affected in a different spot.

So I'm watching them and when the story about Lincoln comes up, you can see everybody wanting to jump in. At that point, it sounded like they had just lost Lincoln. Their Lincoln, the Lincoln that they understood. And now this is speculation, but what I think happens in our education about the Civil War and even about the beginning of the country is that there's two sides, North and South, two sides, anti-slavery and pro-slavery. And there's sort of a thing that we fill in that isn't really stated but is kind of implied, which is that the North should be pro-black, or at least not racist. And the South is totally anti-black.

But that's not actually how this goes. The North was in part against slavery, but they were in no way outside the racial science of their time or the racial theorizing of their time. They did not know what they needed to do with those Black people, but the idea of them roaming all around the country was certainly not a hit in the North. And in fact, that's what happens in reconstruction. Eventually, the anti-Black feelings in the North meant that they could no longer really support radical Republican policies in the South because as soon as slavery was gone, their concerns were gone and their concerns were economic.

The feeling was that slave owners were able to amass too much power, and they felt that that was going to overwhelm free working whites. And so their anti-slavery convictions didn't come about because they had this idea that we were all created equal, including Black people. They were worried about their ability to maintain some power as citizens in the United States. And so Lincoln is talking from what is, at least at this point, and I think I don't know how much it changes in the last year or two of his life.

But he does not want to live with Black people free and in the North. And so he needed a solution. And he thought he was offering a solution that would make everyone happy,

Which is “why don't we just send y'all back to Africa and call it even?” Now, watching the participants in the group understand or or come to grips with the level of racism amongst our best presidents is really, really difficult, by the way, I suspect the play Hamilton is going to generate some of these problems for the next generation because when they find out that Washington was a pretty severe slaveholder, that Thomas Jefferson was a slaveholder who, uh, was a rapist, I think they're going to be a little surprised about the betrayals um, in the play.

Now for me, what struck me in that article, besides the fact that I could feel her freedom to write without compromise, that she wasn't trying to make anyone comfortable and I was just enjoying that at the beginning was the way she put the case, that the revolution was about slavery, not about the ideals of the Enlightenment. And she got a lot of pushback from historians on this, and she's had to change the language to say well, most of the founding fathers were fighting for slavery.

To me in my own reading and research, I think the reason for the American Revolution was to maintain slavery in the face of Great Britain going towards abolition because of their need for black soldiers to fight against the French and the Spanish in places like India, but also in the islands of the Western Hemisphere. I believe our founding fathers founded the country to maintain their lifestyle, a lifestyle which had Thomas Jefferson at 33 quite rich. And so I started looking through that historical record a little more closely, and I think that's where it took me.

And I guess that that's what brings me to the idea of who is going to carry the ideals of the Declaration of Independence.

Genevieve: One of the cases she makes in the article is that Black people, for their entire history in this country, are the people who have fought the hardest to actually make the country's founding ideals true, even harder than perhaps the the authors of the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution itself. And I was a little surprised by that and would love to hear your perspective and some context around how the efforts of Black Americans have been met by white Americans, especially during the reconstruction era and after.

Byron: So I'd like to start by giving credit to Juliette from one of our working groups, because after the history and with Lincoln and going back to the revolution being about slavery, so many of the Founding Fathers. I was talking about how difficult it would be to teach American history where there's no heroes. And then Juliette said, the Black people are the heroes, and I think that is right. I mean, even before you get to the ideals of the country and the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, the slaves were given bibles pretty quickly, and it's kind of funny because they're given this Old Testament book, which is largely about how, well not largely, but in part is about Jews being enslaved or Israelites being enslaved by the Egyptians.

And so there's all these stories about having to deal with slavery. I mean, this is the whole Moses story that's coming out, and the slaves end up being the ones who are the chosen people of God in that whole story. And they can't figure out what in the world white people are doing pretending that they're part of the Christian story when they're actually the pharaoh. And so you could argue that Black people in this country have been the foundation of Christianity, closer to what the Old Testament taught in experience and in attitude than anything ever exhibited by white evangelicals.

But putting that aside, I think there's always been an understanding with Black people that it had to be everyone. Now it's possible that indigenous populations were not put in this. But to be honest, I think that they were included just from what little I understand about Florida, um, South Carolina and Georgia? Well, Georgia and Florida, mostly. Black people have been the ones that have been pushing for full citizenship for everyone -- unqualified. Full voting rights for everyone without qualification. In the South, you would not have public schools right now, except for after the Civil War, black and poor white legislators writing constitutions that created mandatory public schools in most Southern states.

If you go back and read those constitutions, you're gonna find state constitutions written during reconstruction that are closer to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence than either the Constitution of the United States or state constitutions in the Northern States. They are going to embody the ideals of equality within a patriarchal system closer than anything else we've ever done. The reason that the civil rights movement of the sixties could have so much success is that while white America had been telling itself that it was for quality for all people and just not mentioning that, of course we don't mean Black and brown people, that civil rights movement could say it unqualified out loud.

And so all of the people who didn't realize "Oh, that's right, we weren't saying this part" could come out and join them. The fight for Black equality and full citizenship is the fight for the nation's ideals. That's why Black lives matter already means everybody else's life matters. That's why you don't need a qualification around that. But then when you go farther, what you realize is that the oppression that comes with being white. The fact that you have to oppress actually removes you, takes you farther away from those ideals in ways that you don't even realize that are just part of your habits of living away from this group or being afraid of this group or being able to be manipulated out of what you want politically because you're so worried about this group on the other side, it's actually taken those that have been given white privilege and put them farther from the ideals of the country.

If you want to know what America is about, what the American spirit is about, what it is to endure, what it is to make incredible progress under the most inhumane of circumstances. Look at Black Americans. They're not from somewhere else. There's a story, I think, in that article where in second grade she's asked to go talk about the country that her family is from and to bring up the flag. And she looks at the other Black girl, and she's like, "Uh, Africa is not a country," but she goes up and she just picks a country and a flag just to get through the assignment.

But it also means that Black people are from here, everybody else tracing the history, my Italian American friends in San Jose telling me just what part of I think it's Italy that their family comes from. They still see their past there. For Black Americans. It's pretty amorphous. We're from here. We built this place with our sweat. It doesn't happen without us. We are the unhyphenated Americans. Now the indigenous populations would like to talk about how it's actually their land, and I have no quarrel with that.

And by the way, I think a lot of the problems we have right now, because we have never looked to their wisdom for how to manage the land and its theirs. But in terms of that nation that was built here, called the United States of America, it has no greater incarnation than in Black Americans.

Genevieve: As I read the article, I was reminded of a short trip that I had made to South Africa a number of years ago. I toured Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela and his contemporaries were imprisoned by the white leadership at the time. As part of that, the group I was with was treated to a panel discussion over lunch, where both those who had been imprisoned and those who were responsible for imprisoning them spoke together about the power of reconciliation. I was so emotionally moved it how the Black South Africans could put aside the abuse and torture they endured while they were in

prison to forgive those white guards. You know, bigger people than me. I don't know that I could be that magnanimous and forgiving in her article, Hannah-Jones refers to what's going on in America as apartheid. What parallels do you see to what Black Americans are currently going through and have been going through to what she calls apartheid?

Byron: What I believe has happened in the United States is that a minority of elites has ruled, and they have used a color spectrum in order to maintain minority rule. So that's probably one of the, you know, in that sort of general sense, I don't want to, you know, offend anybody by the comparison, because there are very interesting differences. But there also may not have been two more white minority ruled through massive, you know, racial oppression places on the planet beyond those two countries or any greater than those two countries.

What I think we have here is minority rule through racial theology, through habit, but also through violence. And I think one of the things that runs throughout both the apartheid government and the United States government is the violence that's visited upon people to keep them down. I think what is underplayed and under told, um, in our history as we study it ourselves is that Black people kept trying. They kept building. They kept believing. They still believe.

You know, we were just looking at some data where even in organizations where black people Seymour racism than white people see, they still have more belief in those organizations, which is absolutely just, you know, it's amazing. It's astounding to me that that can be the case. I think that whatever that is, I don't even know what to call it. It's why the fears that white people have always used that when you let those slaves go, they're going to go and burn everything down. It never happened.

They just a lot of them just went and ran for office. A lot of them just started working the land as though it were their own, as if the promises were coming through. They just want it. What was theirs. There was no revenge or retribution in it. In the meantime, the amount of violence it's taken to keep them down generation after generation. In the eighties, it was the war on drugs which somehow was an acceptable statement in our political life. It allowed us to incarcerate a couple of generations of Black and brown men for offenses that right now you can see white people lined up at a place called the Apothecary in San Francisco to get the free stuff that has some of those Black and brown people in jail right now.

All of that apparatus, the prison system, the guards who have fantastic benefits, by the way, thanks to Gray Davis in California and others around the country, right, the entire policing systems, the budgets are insane for what they are, you know, for what they do all of this to keep them down. That's what the apartheid government in South Africa did. They spent a lot of money keeping that population down, and they spent a lot of money increasing the fears in the population that if we don't do this, if we aren't brutal, if we aren't complete, if punishment isn't swift, they will come for you in the night.

And that population, living in fear while it dominates. That is what whiteness is in the United States, afraid of Black people as you have your knee on their throat.

Genevieve: Through all of the violence you've talked about the Black Americans have faced since the beginning of this country that they continue to persevere and fight for the ideals is just amazing to me. It actually brings to mind something called the Stockdale paradox that Jim Collins included in his book Good to Great. James Stockdale was a prisoner of war for seven years and felt that he owed his survival to the fact that in the face of the brutal reality, he never lost hope, he said, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end, which you could never afford to lose with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

Do you feel like that's applicable to what Black Americans are going through today? And how is it that they're able to maintain faith and continue to push forward to truly achieving the ideals in the face of the brutal realities of racism still so dominant in the world today?

Byron: My first thought is for those facing oppression that have given up that have given in where the scars are just too harsh. I can think of people in my own family who had these great dreams. The ones I'm thinking of now grew up poor in Louisiana in the thirties and forties, and those dreams were not allowed to be realized. When you heard them talk about the dreams, it was usually through gin and grapefruit juice, just a lull and whatever was going on that evening. There are generations, we have lost generations. We have imprisoned young people that have never been able to grow up with their fathers because the dominant group has taken them away. So a lot of people do get lost along the way.

I think that love of something doesn't make you teach patriotic information. It doesn't make you just look at the person for what's good in them. It makes you look at what's in them all around them, the brutal reality, the good and the bad. And when you have faith

that you can get to your ideals, that you can get to where you want to go with that clear view of yourself with that clear view of that loved one, that clear view of this country that we can get there even as bad as we were, I'm telling you, I think this country was started to maintain slavery, that it was trying to create a slave economic system that would be worldwide.

And I've got the documentation to back it up and I'm still here and I'm on this podcast. I'm trying right now. You know why? I think we could get there now. The reasons for it could be an incredible amount of naivete. Like brother, were four centuries of oppression not enough to convince you that they were never going to change? I still can hear Stokely Carmichael saying talking to white people is a waste of time. And I believe Stokely has a case to make. Although I haven't taken the advice.

What I believe is that the other side politically, the ones that want the patriotic education don't know what love is. They think that if you see the parts of them that are not so beautiful, you won't love them. That if you see the parts of this country that are vile and disgusting, horrific, that you won't fight for this country, that you won't believe in this country, that you won't love this country, and that's because they don't have any idea what love is.

I believe that in some parts of white privilege you have to alienate yourself from love. You have to alienate yourself for community. You have to believe in a notion of individualism that separates you from your children, from your spouse, from everything so that you can be that individual unmoved by whatever events come and you get your security from that. And the only cost for you is love. And I believe that Black Americans with what they have gone through and this is obviously a generalization, not not everyone, but in those communities. They still know what love is. They know what it is to get together and to rely on each other.

They know what it is to see a family member and think, "Oh, my, that's a mess." But they know that that's not a mess. You put in the trash that you can't throw those family members away. That's what it is to be family. That's what it is to love. This is the country we have. Show me all of it. If you are going to really love this country, you have to learn all of it. You have to learn all of what this country has done and what it continues to do.

Then, if you still have the faith that Stockdale speaks off. We can get somewhere we can make a country of our ideals. We don't need the blinders. That's for those that don't know how to love. This is how we come to our country. This is what it's about. Let's put

the rest of this bullshit aside and just learn what there is. We need to know who we are before we take another step forward.

Genevieve: I think the reality is is that you can only love when you know what it is you're loving. You know, if you can't love someone or something with all the flaws that they have, is that really love?

Byron: I think that's the point, right? And I think the second half of that or the flip side of that, is if you feel you have to hide yourself, then you know you're not loved because you haven't put yourself out there. If you can't show this and you can't show that, you know that what they're feeling towards you isn't really towards you, the hiding is the proof that you don't love yourself and that you know you're not loved. When you have to run that whole bluff for your whole life, I think that that may be a greater tragedy.

There's a reason to walk away from whiteness from white identity, a reason to walk away from privilege. There is something to be had on the other side, and what is to be had is love and community and connection really, really all the way down because you don't really have to hide anything anymore. You know? We're all in this together. Can we just get together and go?

Genevieve: Well, here's to hoping that we as a country are able to find the capacity to love in spite of all of the flaws and to work harder to address those. Byron thank you for your time today.

Byron: Thank you.

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