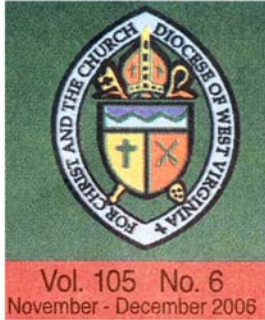


## An Essay on Ending Racism

by the Reverend Dallas B. Shaffer, PhD



From its origins, our essentially Christian republic has derived from the Scriptures its basic law and the ideal of equality. The Declaration of Independence, of July 4, 1776, proclaimed that ideal which Lincoln called “a beacon to guide us” in creating a more perfect union:

*“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...  
endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,  
that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”*

Efforts to attain that ideal of liberty culminated in the Civil War when Northern army morale was bolstered by the words of the battle hymn, “*as He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.*” At the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives, Blacks were made free by Amendment Thirteen to the U.S. Constitution. Three years later in 1868 - in order to secure the equality of Blacks – the Declaration’s ideal was enacted into law by Amendment Fourteen:

*...nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of the law, nor deny to any person the equal protection of the laws.”*

However, enforcement of acts of Congress to carry out the amendment was suspended by the 1890s because the people deserted the ideal and permitted racism to become the law of the land in the old South. The Jim Crow laws, American apartheid, set aside all rights of Blacks and required complete racial segregation in all public facilities- a denial of equality and a bold proclamation of white supremacy. The courts approved these ignominious badges of inferiority for a half century, despite Amendment Fourteen and the Declaration’s principles. This serfdom was enforced by state and vigilante terrorism, waged by brutal beatings, the lynching of hundreds, and race riots - even in Lincoln’s home town. And the goal stated in the Preamble of the Constitution- achieving a more perfect Union- was no longer an American priority.

If truth is the first casualty of war, concern for equality and individual rights is a close second. In World War I as we fought to “make the world safe for democracy,” Congress created a “constitutional dictatorship” by giving the President unprecedented wartime power, curbed civil rights, and permitted powerful racist politicians to thwart the Black quest for equality.

The ideal of equality again became an American priority in the 1930s when the world was threatened by the formidable power of that axis of evil – the German, Italian, and Japanese racist dictatorships. United States propaganda focused on Nazi Germany’s vicious racism, identifying in our thinking racism as the ultimate evil. In World War II, the Japanese-American [Nisei] army combat units and the Black fighter pilots proved to be among the most skillful and highly decorated warriors in the world. Yet racism continued unabated. Thousands of Japanese-American citizens lost all rights and were “detained” for months in military camps on grounds of “national security.” The equality of Blacks was no longer a national priority.

Segregation at all levels of government and in the military services was strictly observed, while race riots erupted in many urban areas. After thousands of Americans had died in World War II to rid the world of racist tyrannies, we applied the ideal of equality by creating new democratic governments with

voting rights for minorities and women in Germany, Italy and Japan. Yet for twenty years we failed to secure those rights for American Black citizens. Powerful segregationist politicians succeeded in denying to Blacks rights then enjoyed by our former racists foes, and continued to suspend the century-old Fifteenth Amendment of 1870 guaranteeing them the right to vote.


But by 1966 dramatic changes in public attitudes had brought about a social revolution which embodied the ideal of equality. The inspiring leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other talented Black ministers helped to create public opinion increasingly pressuring our government to abolish apartheid. In response the national government was committed to a costly but successful war against state and vigilante terrorism, again waged by beatings, lynchings, assassinations, race riots, bombings, and burning of churches. With the end of law-based overt racism, the battle cry “We Shall Overcome” seemed to be a dream realized as Blacks voted and shared political power at all levels. The pursuit of happiness, our national creed, now meant their equal opportunities to realize aspirations for the better life. Government severely punished discrimination by businesses, schools, public agencies, and individuals. Economic, if not moral, incentives prompted many private schools to integrate and become eligible for federal funding. And the people’s demand for the ideal prompted federal courts to reinterpret the Fourteenth Amendment to secure for millions of American women equality before the law.

An object lesson of our experience- no constitutional right will be observed without the support of the people. With rare exceptions, elected officials deal with civil rights according to the people’s attitudes. The present danger is that in this wartime climate of fear and insecurity, people tend to lose interest and tolerate public and private racist practices, as now reported by the mass media and highlighted by numerous suits filed against hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Racism cannot be completely or permanently eliminated- it is an enduring power in every generation and a threat as long as there is evil.

Public opinion can compel government to end overt racism, such as the Jim Crow system. But covert racism, prejudiced minds and attitudes, is the wellspring of racist law and behavior, no less destructive than overt racism, but far more difficult to address. In northern and western states, where racism generally has no basis in law, covert racism caused untold individual suffering, waves of violence, and race riots. To deal with covert racism, however difficult, is the first task in preserving equality, and one mandated by the Scriptures. We cannot preserve the freedoms won by Dr. King and his generation if we ignore the struggle of good and evil for people’s hearts and minds. Racism is an evil requiring our constant efforts to educate people of all ages of our moral obligation. Lest we forget the mistakes of the past and be doomed to repeat them in the future! Pray for a change of heart in people who do not love and respect the dignity of all their neighbors, that our people will always cherish the ideal of equality, and that we will be but ever faithful to our commitment to end racism.

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